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THE
VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE

BY
ALEXANDRE DUMAS

*COMPLETE TRANSLATION
FROM THE LATEST FRENCH EDITION*

VOLUME III.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS.

- ANNE OF AUSTRIA, queen mother.
ARAMIS, successively Abbé d'Herblay, Bishop of Vannes,
General of the Order of Jesuits, and Duc d'Alaméda.
ARISTE, clerk of Brienne.
ARNOUX, M^{LLE}., of the court.
ATHOS, Comte de la Fère.
BAISEMEAUX DE MONTLEZUN, DE, Governor of Bastille.
BAZIN, former lackey to Aramis.
BEAUFORT, DUC DE, grandson of Henri IV.
BELLIERE, MARQUISE ELISE DE, of the court.
BERNOUIN, valet to Cardinal Mazarin.
BERTAUDIERE No. 3, prison name of Philippe the Pretender.
BISCARRAT, GEORGES DE, officer of the King's Guards.
BLASOIS, servant of Athos.
BONSTETT, MEINHEER, Jesuit merchant of Bremen.
BRAGELONNE, RAOUL, VICOMTE DE, son of Athos.
BRETEUIL, colleague of Colbert.
BRIENNE, DE, secretary to Cardinal Mazarin.
BUCKINGHAM, GEORGE VILLIERS, DUKE OF, of the English
court.
CÉLESTIN, servant of Planchet.
CHALAIS, M^{LLE}. DE, of the court.
CHARLES II., King of England.
CHÂTILLON, M^{LLE}. DE, of the court.
CHEVREUSE, DUCHESSE DE, former confidante of Anne of
Austria; also known as Marie Michon.
COLBERT, JEAN-BAPTISTE, successively bursar to Cardinal
Mazarin, Intendant of Finance, and Prime Minister of
France.
CONDÉ, LOUIS DE BOURBON, PRINCE DE, of the royal house.
CONRART, friend of Fouquet.
CRÉQUY, M^{LLE}. DE, of the court.
CROPOLE, landlord of the Medici tavern.
CROPOLE, M^{ME}., wife of foregoing.
DANGEAU, of the court.

DANICAMP, servant of Fouquet.

D'ARTAGNAN, successively Lieutenant and Captain of the King's Musketeers, Count, and Marshal of France.

DESTOUCHES, aid to Colbert.

D'EYMERIS, farmer-general of revenue.

DIGBY, aid-de-camp to General Monk.

D'INFREVILLE, aid to Colbert.

D'ORLÉANS, GASTON, DUC, uncle of Louis XIV.

D'ORLÉANS, DUCHESSE, wife of foregoing.

D'ORLÉANS, PHILIPPE, DUC D'ANJOU ("Monsieur"), brother of Louis XIV.

D'ORLÉANS, DUCHESSE, HENRIETTA OF ENGLAND ("Madame"), wife of foregoing.

FAUCHEUX, goldsmith.

FORANT, aid to Colbert.

FOUQUET, NICOLAS, superintendent of finance.

FOUQUET, MME., wife of foregoing.

FOUQUET, ABBÉ, brother of Nicolas.

FRANÇOIS, servant of Baisemeaux.

FRIEDRICH, DE, officer of the Swiss Guards.

GECHTER, MME., housekeeper of Planchet.

GESVRES, DE, Captain of the King's Guards.

GÉTARD, architect.

GOENNEC, sailor.

GOURVILLE, friend of Fouquet.

GRAFFTON, MISS MARY, of the English court.

GRAMMONT, MARÉCHAL DE, of the court.

GRIMAUD, steward of Athos.

GRISART, Jesuit physician.

GUÉNAUD, physician to Mazarin.

GUICHE, COMTE DE, of the court.

HAVARD, colleague of Colbert.

HERREBIA, CARDINAL, Spanish Jesuit.

JUPENET, printer to Fouquet.

KÉROUALLE, LOUISE DE, afterwards Duchess of Portsmouth.

KEYSER, Dutch fisherman.

LAFAYETTE, MME. DE, of the court.

LA FONTAINE, JEAN DE, friend of Fouquet.

LAMBERT, English general.

LA MOLINA, Spanish nurse to Anne of Austria.

LA VALLIÈRE, MME. LOUISE DE LA BAUME LE BLANC DE, of the court.

- LE BRUN, painter to Fouquet.
 LE NÔTRE, architect to Fouquet.
 LETELLIER, MICHEL, minister of France.
 LORET, friend of Fouquet.
 LORRAINE, CHEVALIER DE, favorite of Philippe d'Orléans.
 LOUIS XIV., King of France.
 LYODOT, farmer-general of revenue.
 LYONNE, minister of France.
 MACCUMNOR, Scotch Jesuit.
 MALICORNE, friend of Manicamp.
 MANCINI, M^{LL}E. HORTENSE DE, niece of Cardinal Mazarin.
 MANCINI, M^{LL}E. MARIE DE, niece of Cardinal Mazarin.
 MANCINI, M^{LL}E. OLYMPE DE, niece of Cardinal Mazarin.
 MANICAMP, friend of De Guiche.
 MARCHIALI, prison name of Philippe the Pretender.
 MARIA TERESA, Queen of France.
 MARIN, colleague of Colbert.
 MARINI, Venetian Jesuit.
 MAZARIN, GIULIO (JULES), CARDINAL, Prime Minister of France.
 MENNEVILLE, adventurer.
 MOLIERE, JEAN-BAPTISTE POQUELIN DE, friend of Fouquet.
 MONK, English general, afterwards Duke of Albemarle.
 MONTALAIS, M^{LL}E. AURE DE, of the court.
 MONTESPAN, DE, of the court.
 MOTTEVILLE, M^{ME}. DE, of the court.
 MOUSQUETON, or MOUSTON, steward of Porthos.
 NAVAILLES, M^{ME}. DE, of the court.
 NORFOLK, DUKE OF, English admiral.
 OLIVAIN, lackey to the Vicomte de Bragelonne.
 PARRY, servant of Charles II.
 PELLISSON, or PÉLISSON, friend of Fouquet.
 PERCERIN, JEAN, tailor to the King.
 PHILIPPE (known also as Bertaudière No. 3, Marchiali, and The Iron Mask), twin brother of Louis XIV., and Pretender to the throne of France.
 PITTRINO, painter to Cropole.
 PLANCHET, former lackey to D'Artagnan; now grocer.
 PORTHOS, successively Baron du Vallon, de Bracieux, de Pierrefonds.
 PRESSIGNY, LOUIS CONSTANT DE, captain of the King's frigate "La Pomone."

RABAUD, lackey to D'Artagnan.

ROCHESTER, WILMOT, EARL OF, of the English court.

ROSE, secretary to Louis XIV.

SAINT-AIGNAN, COMTE DE, favorite of Louis XIV.

SAINT-MARS, DE, Governor of Ile de Saint-Marguerite.

SAINT-RÉMY, DE, steward to Gaston d'Orléans.

SAINT-RÉMY, MME. DE, wife of foregoing.

SELDON, prisoner of Bastille.

SOISSONS, COMTESSE DE, of the court.

STEWART, MISS, of the English court.

TOBY, servant of Fouquet.

TONNAY-CHARENTE, Mlle. ATHENAÏS DE, afterwards Mme. de Montespan, of the court.

VALENTINOIS, MME. DE, sister of De Guiche.

VALOT, physician to Louis XIV.

VANEL, successively counsellor in Parliament and Procureur-Général.

VANEL, MME. MARGUERITE, wife of foregoing.

VANIN, farmer-general of revenue.

VATEL, steward to Fouquet.

VILLEROY, DE, of the court.

WARDES, VICOMTE DE, of the court.

WOSTPUR, BARON VON, German Jesuit.

YORK, JAMES, DUKE OF, brother of Charles II., of England.

YVES, sailor.

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THE VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

VOLUME III.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH WE SEE HOW A BARGAIN THAT CANNOT BE MADE
WITH ONE MAY BE MADE WITH ANOTHER.

ARAMIS had guessed rightly. Immediately on leaving the house in the Place Baudoyer, Madame de Chevreuse was driven home. She doubtless feared being followed, and sought in this way to give an innocent air to her expedition; but no sooner had she reached her hôtel and made sure that no one was following her who could cause her uneasiness, than she hastened through her garden by a gate opening on another street, and proceeded to the Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, where M. Colbert lived.

As we have already said, evening had closed in, or rather night, and the darkest of nights. Paris had regained its calm, and now shrouded alike beneath its indulgent cloak of darkness the noble duchess, pursuing her political intrigues, and the humble bourgeoisie, belated at some gay supper, who, leaning on the arm of her lover, was taking the longest way home.

Madame de Chevreuse was too much given to nocturnal politics not to be aware that a minister never denies himself, even in his own house, to young and beautiful women, who dislike the dust of public offices, or to old and experienced ones who dread the echoes of official buildings. A valet received the duchess under the peristyle, and received her very badly, it must be owned; he even went so far as to explain to her, on seeing her face, that it was not at such an hour that ladies of her years ventured to disturb the midnight labors of M. Colbert.

But Madame de Chevreuse, without taking offence, tore a

leaf from her tablets, and wrote her name on it — that resounding name which had often struck unpleasantly on the ear of Louis XIII. and the great cardinal. She wrote it in the straggling, illiterate handwriting of the highest class at that period, folded the paper in a style peculiar to herself, and handed it to the valet without a word, but with so imperious an air, that the fellow, who had a shrewd scent for social distinctions, recognized the princess, bowed, and hastened to M. Colbert.

The minister, on opening the paper, gave a little cry, thereby enlightening the valet as to the importance of this mysterious visit, so that he returned at a run to introduce the duchess.

She ascended somewhat heavily the first long flight of this grand new mansion, and after resting a moment on the landing in order not to enter out of breath, she presented herself before M. Colbert, who had risen to hold open the folding doors for her.

The duchess paused on the threshold to look well at the man with whom she was about to deal. At the first glance his round, burly head, his bushy eyebrows, the ungracious scowl on his face, beneath a skull-cap such as priests wear, his whole aspect, in short, seemed to promise the duchess little difficulty in her negotiations, but also little interest in the discussion of the various clauses; for there was small likelihood that this coarse nature could be susceptible to the charms of a refined vengeance or a gratified ambition. But on a closer inspection of the small, piercing black eyes, the deep vertical furrow in this harsh brow, the imperceptible contraction of these lips, which to the common observer suggested only easy credulity, Madame de Chevreuse changed her mind and said to herself: "I have found my man."

"What has procured me the honor of this visit, madame?" asked the minister of finance.

"The need I have of you, monsieur," replied the duchess, "and also the need you have of me."

"I am charmed, madame, to hear your first clause, but as to the second —"

Madame de Chevreuse seated herself in the arm-chair Colbert placed for her.

"M. Colbert, you are the intendant of finance?"

"Yes, madame."

"And you wish to be superintendent?"

"Madame!"

"Do not deny it; you would only prolong the conversation. It is quite useless."

"Nevertheless, madame, much as I may desire to show goodwill and courtesy to a lady of your merit, nothing will induce me to admit that I wish to supplant my superior."

"I said nothing of supplanting, M. Colbert. Did I chance to pronounce that word? I think not. The word 'replace' is less aggressive, and, as M. Voiture would say, more grammatically correct. I merely say that you aspire to replace M. Fouquet."

"The fortune of M. Fouquet is of a nature to resist all attacks. M. le Surintendant plays the part in our day of the Colossus of Rhodes: vessels pass under him, but do not overturn him."

"I should have made use of that very comparison, monsieur. Yes, M. Fouquet plays the part of the Colossus of Rhodes; but I remember hearing M. Courart relate—and he is an academician, I believe—that when the Colossus of Rhodes finally fell, the merchant who overthrew it—a simple merchant, M. Colbert—loaded four hundred camels with the débris; and a merchant has certainly far less power than an intendant of finance!"

"Madame, I assure you that I shall never overthrow M. Fouquet."

"Very well, M. Colbert, since you persist in playing at sensibility with me, as if you did not know that I am Madame de Chevreuse, and that I am no longer young; in short, that you have to do with a woman who had political dealings with M. de Richelieu and who has no time to lose,—since, I say, you are committing this imprudence, I will be off and look for some one with more wit and a keener desire to make his fortune."

"In what way, madame, in what way?"

"Monsieur, you give me a poor idea of the negotiations of to-day. I vow to you that in my time, if a woman had sought out M. de Cinq-Mars—who yet was not possessed of a great intelligence—I swear to you that if she had told him in regard to the cardinal what I have just told you of M. Fouquet, M. de Cinq-Mars would already have had his irons in the fire."

"Come, madame, come, be a little more indulgent!"

"Then you will really consent to replace M. Fouquet?"

"Most certainly, should the King dismiss M. Fouquet."

"Again a word too much; it is very evident, since you have not succeeded in having M. Fouquet dismissed, that you have not the power to do so, and I should be a fool indeed if I had come to you without bringing the very thing you lack."

"I am distressed at being obliged to insist," said M. Colbert, after a silence which enabled the duchess to sound the very depths of his duplicity; "but I must warn you that for the last six years denunciation upon denunciation has been brought against M. Fouquet without shaking him in the slightest degree."

"There is a time for everything, M. Colbert. Those who brought these denunciations were not named Madame de Chevreuse, and did not bring such proofs against him as six letters from M. de Mazarin, making his offence plain."

"His offence?"

"His crime, if you like better."

"A crime — committed by M. Fouquet?"

"Nothing less. On my word, M. Colbert, this is strange! You have a cold face that reveals little, and yet I see it suddenly lighted up."

"A crime —"

"I am enchanted that the word produces such an effect on you."

"It is a word, madame, that involves many things."

"Yes, it involves among other things the post of superintendent of finance for you, and a sentence of exile or the Bastille for M. Fouquet."

"Pardon me, Madame la Duchesse, it is almost impossible that M. Fouquet should be exiled. Prison or disgrace merely would be much."

"Oh, I know of what I speak," replied Madame de Chevreuse, coldly. "I do not live so far from Paris as not to be aware of much that is going on here. The King does not love M. Fouquet and would gladly ruin him if some one would give him the opportunity."

"But the opportunity must be a good one."

"It is fairly good, in truth. I reckon it to be worth five hundred thousand livres."

"How mean you?" asked Colbert.

"I mean, monsieur, that holding this opportunity in my hands, I will deliver it into yours only for the sum of five hundred thousand livres."

"Very good, madame, I understand. But since you have fixed your price, let us look at the value of the merchandise."

"Oh, a mere trifle: six letters, as I told you, from M. de Mazarin; autographs which will surely not be too dear, if they furnish undeniable proof that M. Fouquet has misappropriated large sums from the treasury."

"Undeniable proof?" exclaimed Colbert, with sparkling eyes.

"Undeniable! Will you read the letters?"

"With all my heart! — a copy, without doubt?"

"Most certainly a copy;" and so speaking, the duchess drew from her bosom a little packet flattened by her velvet bodice.

"Read!" she said.

Colbert fell eagerly upon the papers and devoured them.

"Excellent!" he cried.

"It is clear, is it not?"

"Yes, madame, yes! M. de Mazarin delivered certain sums to M. Fouquet, who misappropriated this money. But the question remains: What sums were they?"

"Ah, there it is! what sums? But if we conclude a bargain, I will add to these letters a seventh, giving you the fullest particulars."

Colbert reflected. "And the originals of these letters?"

"A needless question. It is as if I were to ask you, M. Colbert, whether the money-bags I am to receive from you will be full or empty."

"Very well, madame."

"It is settled, then?"

"Not yet. There is one circumstance which neither you nor I have considered."

"And what may that be?"

"M. Fouquet cannot be ruined in this affair except by a trial and a public scandal."

"Very well — what then?"

"We can never bring him to trial, nor create such a scandal!"

"And why not?"

"Because he is procureur-général to Parliament. Because

in France the administration, the army, the courts of law, everything in short, is bound by that tie which we call *esprit de corps*. Thus, madame, the Parliament will never suffer its head to be dragged before a tribunal, or, should he be summoned there by royal authority, he will never be condemned!"

"*Ma foi!* M. Colbert, that is no affair of mine."

"I know it, madame; but it is my affair, and it diminishes the value of your merchandise. Of what use to me is a proof of crime without the possibility of a sentence?"

"But M. Fouquet has only to be suspected to lose his office of superintendent."

"That would be a great affair!" cried Colbert, his sombre features suddenly kindled with a look of hatred and revenge.

"Ah, ah! M. Colbert. Excuse me, but I did not know you were so impressionable. Very well, since you require more than I have to give, let us talk no more about it."

"On the contrary, madame, let us continue to talk about it; only, your values having diminished, you will be pleased to lower your demands."

"You would bargain with me?"

"It is necessary for one who wishes to pay loyally?"

"How much, then, do you offer me?"

"Two hundred thousand livres."

The duchess laughed in his face, then suddenly: "Wait," cried she.

"You consent?"

"Not yet. I have thought of another combination. You shall give me three hundred thousand livres —"

"Not at all, not at all!"

"Oh, you can take it or leave it — but that is not all."

"What, more? You are becoming impossible, Madame la Duchesse."

"Less so than you imagine. It is not money I ask for now."

"What then?"

"You know how tenderly I have always loved the queen. I wish to have an interview with her Majesty."

"With the queen?"

"Yes, M. Colbert, with the queen, who is no longer my friend, it is true; who long ago ceased to be so, but who may become my friend once more, if the occasion arises."

"Her Majesty no longer receives any one, madame. She

suffers greatly. You must be aware that the attacks of her malady have become more frequent."

"It is precisely for that reason that I desire an interview with her Majesty. You must know that in Flanders we have many cases of that disease."

"What! Of cancer, that frightful, incurable malady?"

"Not incurable, M. Colbert. The Flemish peasant is still something of a savage, you must know. He does not have a wife precisely. He has a female."

"Well, madame?"

"Well, M. Colbert, while he smokes his pipe his wife works. She draws water from the well; she loads the mule or the ass with burdens; she bears them herself; she takes little care of her health, and is knocked about roughly here and there; she is even beaten. Such diseases often arise from a contusion."

"Very true."

"But the Flemish women do not die, for all that. When their sufferings become too great they go in search of a remedy; and the Béguines of Bruges are admirable doctors for all sorts of maladies. They have various precious waters and specifics. They give to each patient a bottle of this water and a wax candle, thus making a profit out of the clergy and serving God at the same time. I shall, therefore, take the queen some of this blessed water from the Bruges nunnery. Her Majesty will recover, and will burn as many candles as she sees fit. You see, M. Colbert, that to prevent my visiting the queen would be almost committing regicide."

"Madame la Duchesse, you are too clever for me. You amaze me! Still, I divine that behind this great charity towards the queen there is hidden some small personal profit."

"Do I attempt to disguise it, M. Colbert? You said some *small* personal profit, I believe. Learn, then, that it is a great profit, as I will prove to you by recapitulating. If you will procure me an interview with her Majesty, I will content myself with the three hundred thousand livres I first claimed, otherwise I will keep my letters, or you shall give me on the spot five hundred thousand livres." And rising to her feet with this decisive utterance the old duchess left M. Colbert in a disagreeable state of perplexity. To bargain further had become impossible; to let the bargain drop would involve infinite loss.

"Madame," he said, "I am about to have the pleasure of handing you a hundred thousand crowns."

"Oh!" exclaimed the duchess.

"But how shall I obtain possession of the original letters?"

"In the simplest possible way, my dear M. Colbert. Whom do you trust?"

The grave financier began to smile without speaking, in a way that set his great black eyebrows rising and falling like the wings of a bat against the deep furrows of his fallow forehead.

"No one," he said.

"Oh, but you will surely make an exception in favor of yourself, M. Colbert."

"How is that, madame?"

"I mean to say that if you will take the trouble to come with me to the place where the letters are deposited, they shall be delivered into your hands, and you can examine and verify them."

"That is well."

"But you must come provided with the hundred thousand crowns, for I, also, trust no one."

M. the Intendant Colbert flushed to his eyelids, for, like most great financiers, he was of an insolent, mathematical probity.

"I will bring the promised sum, madame, in two bonds payable on my treasury. Will that satisfy you?"

"Would that your treasury-bonds were for two millions, M. l'Intendant! Shall I have the honor of showing you the way?"

"Permit me to order my carriage."

"I have a carriage at the door, monsieur."

Colbert coughed in an irresolute fashion; for a moment he feared lest the duchess's proposition might be a snare, lest some one might be lying in wait for him at his door, lest this lady who had just sold her secret for one hundred thousand crowns to Colbert might have offered this same secret already to Fouquet for the same price.

While he still hesitated the duchess looked him full in the eyes.

"You prefer your own carriage, monsieur?" she said.

"I must own that I do —"

"You imagine that I am leading you into a trap."

“Madame la Duchesse you have a sprightly nature, while I, being of a graver turn, might find myself compromised by a jest.”

“In short, you are afraid? Very well! order your own carriage and as many lackeys as you like; only reflect well — what we two are doing, we alone know; but what has been seen by a third person is known to all the universe. After all, it is nothing to me; my carriage can follow, and all I ask is that you will give me a seat in your carriage to go to the queen.”

“To the queen, madame?”

“What! you have forgotten already? Has a clause of such importance to me escaped you? What a trifle it seems to you after all! If I had guessed it I would have doubled my price.”

“I have reflected, Madame la Duchesse; I shall not accompany you.”

“And why is that, pray?”

“Because I place boundless confidence in you.”

“You overwhelm me! But how, then, shall I receive my hundred thousand crowns?”

The intendant scrawled a few words on a paper, which he handed to the duchess.

“You are paid,” said he.

“That is a fine stroke, M. Colbert, and I am about to reward you.” As she spoke these words she began to laugh. Madame de Chevreuse’s laugh was a sinister murmur. Any man who felt youth, faith, love, and life still throbbing in his heart would have preferred tears to that lamentable laugh.

The duchess proceeded to open the front of her bodice, and drew from her breast another small packet of papers tied with a flame-colored ribbon. Still laughing, she handed it to the superintendent, who stared aghast at these strange preliminaries.

“There,” she said, “are the original letters of M. de Mazarin. You have them, M. Colbert. And now,” she added, hastily refastening her bodice, “your fortune is achieved. You can accompany me to the queen.”

“Not at all, madame. If you were to incur anew the displeasure of her Majesty, and they should learn at the Palais-Royal that I had introduced you, the queen would never forgive me. No. I have people at the palace devoted to me. They shall admit you without compromising me.”

“As you like, provided I am admitted.”

"What do you call those nuns of Bruges who cure the sick?"

"Béguines."

"Then you shall be a Béguine."

"So be it! but I must soon cease to be one."

"Ah! that is your affair."

"Pardon me! pardon me! I do not wish to run the risk of being refused admittance."

"That also is your affair, madame. I shall order the first valet de chambre of the queen's gentleman-in-waiting to admit a Béguine bringing a sovereign remedy for her Majesty's sufferings. You will carry my letter, and you will take charge of the remedies, and furnish all explanations. I acknowledge the Béguine, but I deny all knowledge of Madame de Chevreuse."

"I care little for that."

"Here is your letter of introduction, madame."

CHAPTER II.

THE SKIN OF THE BEAR.

COLBERT handed the letter to the duchess, and gently drew away the chair by which she was standing. Madame de Chevreuse bowed very slightly, and left the room.

Colbert, who had recognized Mazarin's hand and had counted the letters, rang for his secretary and ordered him to go at once in search of M. Vanel, counsellor of parliament. The secretary replied that the counsellor, according to his usual custom, had just come in to give M. Colbert an account of the day's session.

Colbert approached the lamp and reread the letters of the late cardinal, smiling repeatedly as he recognized the importance of the papers which Madame de Chevreuse had delivered to him. Then, with his great head propped on his hands, he gave himself up for a few moments to profound reflection. Meanwhile, a tall man with a lean face, a hooked nose, and a fixed gaze had entered Colbert's cabinet with a modest assurance which revealed a character at once supple and firm — supple towards the master who could fling him his prey, firm

towards the dogs who might attempt to dispute the spoils with him. M. Vanel carried under his arm a voluminous bundle of documents which he laid upon the table where Colbert was leaning.

"Good-day, M. Vanel," said the latter, rousing himself from his meditation.

"Good-day, monseigneur," replied Vanel, simply.

"You should say 'monsieur,' not 'monseigneur,'" amended Colbert, gently.

"We call ministers 'monseigneur,'" said Vanel, with unruffled composure, "and you are a minister."

"Not yet."

"You are so in fact; therefore I call you 'monseigneur;' besides, you are my seigneur, and that is enough for me. If it annoys you to be called so in public, let me at least give you the title when we are alone."

Colbert raised his head and read, or strove to read, in Vanel's countenance how much sincerity entered into these protestations of devotion. But the counsellor knew how to meet a scrutinizing gaze, even if that gaze were monseigneur's.

Colbert sighed; he could read nothing on Vanel's face. Vanel might be sincere, and Colbert reflected that this inferior was superior to him in the very fact of having an unfaithful wife. At the moment that he was pitying the man's lot, Vanel coldly drew from his pocket a perfumed note, sealed with Spanish wax, and handed it to Colbert.

"What is this, Vanel?"

"A letter from my wife, monseigneur."

Colbert coughed, opened the letter, read it, and thrust it in his pocket, while Vanel was carelessly turning over his parliamentary papers.

"Vanel," suddenly said the protector to the protégé, "you are an industrious man."

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Twelve hours of study do not terrify you?"

"I work fifteen daily."

"Impossible! A counsellor has but three hours a day of parliamentary duty."

"Oh! I work up returns for a friend in the audit office, and in my spare time I am studying Hebrew."

"You are highly esteemed in parliament, Vanel?"

"I believe so, monseigneur."

"You ought not to stagnate in the post of counsellor."

"How can I do otherwise?"

"By purchasing a place."

"What place?"

"Oh, something large. Small ambitions are the hardest to satisfy."

"Small purses, monseigneur, are the hardest to fill. And, moreover, what vacant place is there?"

"I know of none, it is true."

"And yet there is one, but only the King could buy it without becoming straitened; and the King, I venture to say, will not seek to buy the post of procureur-général."

On hearing these words Vanel turned his humble, spiritless glance upon Colbert, and in vain did the minister ask himself whether this man had divined his meaning.

"Why do you speak to me, monseigneur, of the post of procureur-général? I know of no such post, except the one occupied by M. Fouquet."

"Precisely, my dear counsellor."

"You are not squeamish, monseigneur," said Vanel; "but before merchandise can be bought it must be for sale."

"I believe, M. Vanel, that it will be for sale before long —"

"For sale? M. Fouquet's post of procureur-général?"

"Such is the rumor."

"The office for sale which renders him inviolable? Impossible!" and Vanel began to laugh.

"Should you be afraid of this office, then?" asked Colbert, gravely.

"Afraid? oh, no, but —"

"Nor ambitious for it?"

"Monseigneur is laughing at me," replied Vanel. "How could a counsellor of parliament fail to be ambitious of becoming procureur-général?"

"Well, then, M. Vanel, since I tell you that the post is to be offered for sale —"

"So monseigneur says."

"That is the common report."

"But I repeat that it is impossible. No man would throw away the buckler behind which he shelters his honor, his fortune, his very life."

"There are fools sometimes, M. Vanel, who think themselves above the reach of ill-fortune."

"Yes, monseigneur; but such fools do not commit their follies for the benefit of the poor Vanels of this world."

"Why not?"

"Simply because these Vanels are poor."

"It is true that M. Fouquet's office might cost dear. How much would you give for it, M. Vanel?"

"All that I possess, monseigneur."

"And what might that be?"

"Between three and four hundred thousand livres."

"And the post is worth?"

"A million and a half at the lowest. I know people who have offered seventeen hundred thousand livres without moving M. Fouquet. If it chanced that M. Fouquet actually wished to sell, which I doubt in spite of all that I have heard —"

"Ah! you *have* heard it, then? From whom?"

"From M. Gourville — M. Pélisson — mere rumors!"

"Very good. If M. Fouquet should wish to sell, then?"

"Even in that case I could not buy, seeing that the superintendent will sell for ready money only, and no one has a million and a half to throw down all at once."

Colbert here interrupted the counsellor with an imperious gesture. He had resumed his meditation. Seeing his master's serious attitude and his persistence in confining the conversation to this subject, M. Vanel awaited an explanation without daring to solicit one.

"Explain to me," said M. Colbert, suddenly, "the privileges of a procureur-général."

"The right of bringing to judgment any French subject who is not a prince of the blood; the right of annulling all proceedings against any Frenchman who is not king or prince. The procureur-général is the King's right arm to strike down the guilty; he is likewise the arm that can quench the torch of justice. Therefore M. Fouquet can maintain himself against the King in person by stirring up the parliament, and therefore the King spares M. Fouquet, in spite of everything, in order to have his edicts registered without contest. The procureur-général may be a very useful or a very dangerous tool."

"Do you wish to be procureur-général, Vanel?" said Colbert suddenly, with a softened voice and look.

"I!" exclaimed the other. "I have just had the honor of

explaining to monseigneur that my coffers lack at least eleven hundred thousand livres of the price."

"You can borrow that sum from your friends."

"I have no friends richer than myself."

"A truly honest man!"

"Would that all the world thought as you, monseigneur."

"I think so, and that is enough. In case of need I will go bail for you."

"Beware of the proverb, monseigneur."

"What proverb?"

"'Go bail and you pay.'"

"That would not deter me."

Vanel rose, greatly stirred by this offer, made so suddenly and unexpectedly by a man whom even the most frivolous were forced to take seriously.

"Do not trifle with me, monseigneur," he said.

"Come! we must act quickly, M. Vanel. You say that M. Gourville has spoken to you about M. Fouquet's post."

"Yes, and M. Péliisson also."

"Officially or officiously?"

"These were their words: 'These parliament people are rich and ambitious; they ought to combine and advance two or three millions to M. Fouquet, their great luminary and protector.'"

"What did you answer?"

"I said that for my part I would give ten thousand livres if need were."

"Ah! you love M. Fouquet, then?" cried M. Colbert, with a glance full of hatred.

"No, but M. Fouquet is our chief, he is in debt, he is on the verge of ruin. We must save him for the honor of the body to which we belong."

"This explains to me why M. Fouquet will always go unharmed while he occupies his present post," replied Colbert.

"Thereupon," pursued Vanel, "M. Gourville added: 'To offer charity to M. Fouquet would be a humiliating proceeding, to which he would certainly reply by a refusal; but let parliament unite in buying the office of procureur-général in a dignified manner and all will be well, the honor of the body will be secure, and M. Fouquet's pride safe.'"

"That was undoubtedly an opening."

"I regarded it as such, monseigneur."

"Very well, M. Vanel, you may go at once to M. Gourville and M. Péllisson; do you know any other friend of M. Fouquet?"

"I know M. de la Fontaine very well."

"La Fontaine the rhymester?"

"The same. He often made verses for my wife when we were friends of M. Fouquet's."

"You can address yourself to him, then, to obtain an interview with the procureur-général?"

"Easily; but the money?"

"At the appointed day and hour you shall have the sum in your possession. Give yourself no concern."

"Monseigneur, such munificence! You eclipse the King; you surpass M. Fouquet himself."

"One moment. Let us not misuse words. I am not giving you fourteen hundred thousand livres, M. Vanel; I have my children to think of."

"Certainly, monseigneur. You are lending them to me; that is enough. Ask whatever security, whatever interest you wish — I am ready to satisfy you. I repeat that you surpass kings and M. Fouquet himself in munificence. What are your conditions?"

"Repayment in eight years."

"Very good."

"A mortgage on the office itself."

"Certainly; is that all?"

"Wait. I reserve to myself the right of redeeming the post at an advance of a hundred and fifty thousand livres, in case you should not fill the office in conformity with the service of the King and my purposes."

"Oh!" exclaimed Vanel, somewhat startled.

"Is there anything in this condition that disturbs you, M. Vanel?" asked Colbert, coldly.

"No, no!" eagerly replied Vanel.

"Then we will sign the act whenever you please. Hasten to find M. Fouquet's friends."

"I fly at once—"

"And secure an interview with the superintendent."

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Be easy in regard to concessions, and so soon as the arrangements are made —"

"I shall hasten to secure his signature."

"Take care that you do nothing of the kind. Never speak of signatures to M. Fouquet, nor of bonds, nor even of pledging his word."

"But what, then, monseigneur?"

"Simply try to have M. Fouquet give you his hand on it. Go!"

CHAPTER III.

AT THE QUEEN MOTHER'S.

THE queen mother was in her bed chamber at the Palais-Royal with Madame de Motteville and the Señora Molina. The King, who had been expected all day, had not yet arrived, and the queen, in her impatience, had sent frequently for tidings of him. There seemed to be a storm in the air; the courtiers and ladies-in-waiting avoided each other in the antechambers and corridors, lest they might utter some word on compromising subjects. Monsieur had joined the King in the morning on a hunting party. Madame had kept her own apartment in a fit of the sulks. As for the queen mother, having said her prayers in Latin, she was now chatting of domestic affairs with her two friends in the purest Castilian. Madame de Motteville, though understanding that language perfectly, replied in French.

When the three ladies had exhausted all the formulas of dissimulation and courtesy before reaching the point of saying that the King's conduct was breaking the hearts of the Queen, the queen mother, and all his relations; when they had fulminated their imprecations, all clothed in the choicest terms, against Mademoiselle de la Vallière, the queen mother wound up her recriminations with this ejaculation, so expressive of her own character and feelings: "*Estos hijos!*" which means "These children!" — words of deep meaning on a mother's lips — words of terrible meaning on the lips of a queen who, like Anne of Austria, had buried such strange secrets in the depths of her soul.

"Yes," replied Molina, "these children, to whom every mother sacrifices herself."

"To whom," replied the queen, "a mother sacrifices all —"

Anne did not finish her sentence, for it seemed to her, as she

raised her eyes to a full-length portrait of the pale Louis XIII., that a light gleamed in her husband's dull eyes, that his nostrils quivered with anger; the portrait came to life; it did not speak — it threatened.

A profound silence followed the queen's words, and La Molina stooped to rummage in a great basket of laces and ribbons.

Madame de Motteville, surprised at the flash of intelligence which had passed between the confidante and her mistress, lowered her eyes, like the discreet woman she was, and no longer trying to see, listened with all her ears. She only caught a significant "ahem!" on the part of the Spanish duenna, who was the image of circumspection, and a sigh which escaped the queen, like a breath.

She raised her head at once. "You are suffering?" she said.

"No, Motteville, no; why do you ask?"

"Your Majesty sighed."

"You are right — I am suffering a little."

"M. Valot is close by; he is with Madame."

"And what is he doing there?"

"Madame is troubled with her nerves."

"A fine disorder, forsooth. M. Valot does wrong to visit Madame when another physician could cure her quite as well."

Madame de Motteville cast up her eyes in amazement. "Another physician than M. Valot? Who is he?"

"Work, Motteville, work. Ah! if any one is really ill, indeed, it is my poor daughter."

"And your Majesty, too."

"But less so to-night."

"Ah, do not be too confident, Madame."

And as if to justify Madame de Motteville's forebodings, an acute spasm of pain seized upon the queen, who turned pale, and fell back in her chair as if about to faint.

"My drops!" she murmured.

Molina, without hurrying her steps, took from a tortoise-shell cabinet a great flask of rock-crystals, and brought it, open, to the queen, who inhaled it frantically several times, murmuring: "It is in this way that the Lord will take my life. May his holy will be done!"

"Every one who feels ill does not die," rejoined Molina, as she replaced the flask in the cabinet.

"Is your Majesty better now?" asked Madame de Motteville.

"Slightly better;" and the queen placed her finger on her lip to enjoin discretion on her favorite.

"It is strange!" said Madame de Motteville, after a silence.

"What is strange?" asked the queen.

"Does your Majesty remember the day when this pain seized you for the first time?"

"I remember that it was a grievous day for me, Motteville!"

"Yet it was not always a grievous day for your Majesty."

"How can you know that?"

"Because twenty-three years before, on that same day, madame, the King regnant, your glorious son, was born at the same hour."

The queen gave a cry, bowed her head upon her hands, and lost herself in the depths of memory.

Was it memory or meditation — or was it grief? Molina cast a glance of furious reproach at Madame de Motteville, and that excellent woman, who understood nothing of the matter, was about to question her, when Anne of Austria, raising her head, suddenly exclaimed:

"The 5th of September! Yes, my pain first visited me on the 5th of September; one day, a great joy; another day, a great sorrow! A great sorrow," she added, in a low voice, "in expiation of too great a joy."

And from that moment, Anne of Austria, like one who has exhausted memory and reason, remained impenetrable, her eyes dim, her thoughts wandering, her hands hanging nerveless at her sides.

"We must withdraw," said La Molina.

"Not yet, Molina."

"We must leave the queen alone," persisted the tenacious Spanishwoman.

Madame de Motteville rose; great glittering drops, like the tears of a child, were streaming down the queen's white cheeks, and Molina, perceiving them, watched her with her vigilant black eyes.

"Yes, yes!" rejoined the queen, suddenly; "leave us, Motteville, go!"

This "leave us" sounded disagreeably in the ears of the French favorite; it signified that an interchange of secrets or of memories was about to take place, and that one person was

de trop in the conversation just at the most interesting moment.

"Madame, will Molina suffice for your Majesty's service to-night?" asked the Frenchwoman.

"Yes," replied the Spanishwoman.

Madame de Motteville bowed. Suddenly an old woman in the dress worn at the court of Spain in 1620 drew aside the curtains of the door, and surprised the queen in tears, Madame de Motteville in full retreat, and Molina in her successful strategy.

"The remedy! the remedy!" she cried joyfully to the queen, approaching the group without ceremony.

"What remedy, *Chica*?" asked Anne of Austria.

"For your Majesty's malady," she replied.

"Who brings it?" asked Madame de Motteville, hastily;
"M. Valot?"

"No, a lady from Flanders."

"Is she Spanish?" demanded the queen.

"I do not know."

"Who sent her?"

"M. Colbert."

"What is her name?"

"She has not told it."

"Her station?"

"She will tell you herself."

"Her face?"

"She is masked."

"Go and see, Molina!" cried the queen.

"It is needless," suddenly answered a voice, at once firm and gentle, from behind the tapestry hangings, — a voice which caused the attendants to start and the queen to shudder. At the same moment a masked woman appeared between the curtains, and before the queen had time to speak: "I am a nun from the Béguinage of Bruges," said the unknown, "and I am indeed the bearer of a remedy that will cure your Majesty."

All were silent; the Béguine did not advance a step.

"Speak!" said the queen.

"When we are alone," answered the Béguine.

Anne of Austria glanced at her companions, who at once withdrew; then only did the Béguine advance three steps towards the queen and bow with deep reverence.

The queen gazed with suspicion at this woman, who gazed back at her with flashing eyes through the holes in her mask.

“Is the queen of France so ill, then, that it is known in the Béguinage of Bruges that she needs their remedies?”

“Your Majesty, Heaven be praised! is not so ill as to be past cure.”

“But speak, how did you know that I was ill?”

“Your Majesty has friends in Flanders.”

“And these friends sent you to me?”

“Yes, Madame.”

“Tell me their names.”

“It is impossible, Madame, and useless as well, since your Majesty’s memory is not awakened by your heart.”

Anne of Austria raised her head, seeking to discover, under the shade of the mask, and under the mystery of her words, the name of this woman who addressed her with such familiarity and freedom. Then all at once, wearied by a curiosity wounding to her pride, she said: “Madame, you cannot be ignorant that it is not the custom to address royal personages with the face masked.”

“Deign to excuse me, Madame,” replied the Béguine, humbly.

“I cannot excuse you, I will not forgive you, unless you lay aside your mask.”

“I am under a vow, Madame, to go to the aid of persons in affliction or suffering, without allowing them even to see my face. I could have given solace both to body and mind, but since your Majesty forbids it, I go my way. Adieu, Madame, adieu!”

She uttered these words in such tones of harmony and deference as to dispel the queen’s anger and suspicion without lessening her curiosity.

“You are right,” she rejoined, “it does not become those who suffer to disdain the consolations Heaven sends them. Speak, madame, and may you be able, as you have said, to bring solace to my suffering body, for, alas! I fear that God is about to try it cruelly.”

“Let us speak first of the soul,” said the Béguine, “of the soul, which I feel assured must suffer also.”

“My soul?”

“Yes, Madame, there are insidious diseases whose workings are invisible, which leave to the skin its ivory whiteness;—the physician who bends over the patient does not hear the grinding of the muscles beneath the insatiable tooth of the

monster ; neither fire nor steel has ever destroyed these fatal scourges. They dwell in the thoughts which they corrupt, they grow within the heart until it breaks. These, Madame, are the cancers fatal to queens : have you never suffered from their tortures ? ”

Anne slowly raised her arm, as dazzling in its whiteness, as pure in its outline, as in the days of her youth. “ These ills of which you speak are the conditions of life for us great ones of the earth, to whom God has committed the charge of souls. The Lord disburdens us of these evils, when they become too heavy to be borne, at the tribunal of repentance. There we lay down our burdens and our secrets. But do not forget that the same sovereign Lord measures their trials according to the strength of his creatures ; and the strength he has given me is not unequal to my load. As for the secrets of others, I leave them to the mercy of Heaven ; for my own the discretion of my confessor is all too little.”

“ I see that you are courageous as always towards your enemies, Madame, but I find that you have little confidence in your friends.”

“ Queens have no friends. If you have nothing further to say to me, if you regard yourself as an inspired prophetess, you may leave me ; for I fear the future.”

“ I should have thought,” replied the Béguine, firmly, “ that you feared the past still more.”

She had no sooner pronounced these words than the queen, drawing herself up to her full height, cried in a sharp, imperious tone : “ Speak ! Explain yourself clearly, speedily, fully, or else — ”

“ Nay, do not threaten me, queen,” said the Béguine, gently. “ I have come to you full of compassion ; I have come in the name of a friend.”

“ Prove this to me, then ! Soothe instead of torturing me.”

“ That I can do easily, and your Majesty shall see whether I am her friend. What misfortune has befallen your Majesty in the last twenty-three years ? ”

“ Misfortunes enough — have I not lost the King ? ”

“ I do not speak of such misfortunes. I ask you whether, since the birth of the King, the indiscretion of a friend has ever brought distress to your Majesty.”

“ I do not understand you,” replied the queen, setting her teeth in order to hide her emotion.

"I will make myself clear. Your Majesty remarked that the King was born the 5th of September, 1638, at a quarter after eleven o'clock?"

"Yes," faltered the queen.

"A half-hour after noon," continued the Béguine, "the dauphin, having been baptized by Monseigneur de Meaux in the presence of the King and in yours, was recognized as heir to the throne of France. The King then proceeded to the chapel of the old château of Saint-Germain to celebrate the *Te Deum*."

"That is all quite true," murmured the queen.

"Your Majesty's confinement took place in presence of the late Monsieur, of the princes, and of the ladies of the court. The King's physician, Bouvard, and the surgeon, Honoré, were in attendance in the antechamber. Your Majesty slept from three o'clock until seven, did you not?"

"Very true; but all you are telling me is known to all the world as well as to you and me."

"I am coming, Madame, to something that few persons know,—few, did I say?—alas! I might say two only; for there were but five in all who knew this secret, and for many years past it has been made secure through the death of the chief participators. Our lord the King sleeps with his fathers; the midwife, Péronne, soon followed him; La Porte is already forgotten."

The queen opened her lips to reply. Beneath the icy hand she raised to her forehead she could feel the drops of burning perspiration.

"It was eight o'clock," pursued the Béguine. "The King was supping joyously amidst jubilant shouts and full bumpers, the populace were cheering beneath the palace windows, the Swiss guards, the musketeers, and the royal guards were roaming the streets of the city or being borne aloft in triumph on the shoulders of reeling students.

"At these formidable sounds of popular merriment the dauphin set up a wail in the arms of his nurse, Madame de Hausac,—he the future King of France; he who upon opening his eyes would find two crowns lying in his cradle. Suddenly your Majesty gave a piercing cry, and Dame Péronne reappeared at the bedside. The physicians were dining in a distant room. The palace, after being invaded by the multitude, was now deserted, even by the guards and sentries.

Dame Péronne gave a cry of amazement, and, taking you in her arms weeping, wild with terror, sent Laporte in haste to summon his Majesty to your chamber. Laporte, as you know, was always cool and self-possessed. He did not approach the King like one who has startling intelligence to give, and conscious of his importance wishes to startle in his turn. He appeared at the King's side with a smile on his lips, and said :

“ ‘Sire, the queen is full of happiness, but she would be happier still if she could see your Majesty.’ ”

“ On that day Louis XIII. would have given his crown to the first beggar who cried, ‘God save you.’ Light-hearted and gay, he rose quickly from the table, saying in the tone that Henri IV. might have used : ‘Gentlemen, I am going to see my wife.’ ”

“ As he appeared at your Majesty's bedside, Dame Péronne held up to him a second prince, as strong and handsome as the first, saying : ‘Sire, God does not will the kingdom of France to descend on the distaff side.’ The King, yielding to his first impulse, clasped the child in his arms, crying : ‘God be praised !’ ”

The Béguine paused here, observing how acutely the queen suffered. Anne of Austria had fallen back in her chair, her head bowed, her eyes fixed, hearing without seeming to understand, while her lips quivered with an unspoken prayer to Heaven or an imprecation on this woman.

“ Oh, do not believe,” cried the Béguine, “ though France has but one dauphin, though the queen allowed this second child to pine in obscurity far from the throne, do not believe that she is a heartless mother. Oh, no ! There are those who know how many tears she has shed, who have counted the ardent kisses she showered on the hapless child in exchange for the life of misery and obscurity to which reasons of state condemned this twin brother of Louis XIV.”

“ Merciful Heaven ! ” moaned the queen.

“ It is known,” the Béguine went on eagerly, “ that the King, seeing himself the father of two sons of the same age and the same rights, trembled for the safety of France, for the tranquillity of the state. It is known that Cardinal Richelieu on being summoned, after an hour's meditation in the King's cabinet, finally pronounced this sentence : ‘ There is a king born to succeed his Majesty, and God has sent another to succeed the first ; but at present we need only the first-born. Let us,

therefore, hide the second from France as God has concealed him from his parents themselves. One prince is peace and security to the state; two competitors mean civil war and anarchy.’”

The queen suddenly rose, pale and with clinched hands.

“You know too much,” she said, “since you touch upon affairs of state. As to the friends from whom you hold this secret, they are false and treacherous friends, you are their accomplice in the crime that is now being committed. Off with your mask or I will have you seized by the captain of the guards. Oh, this secret does not terrify me. You have drunk it to your peril! It shall freeze within your breast; neither the secret nor your life henceforth belong to you.”

Anne of Austria, joining a threatening gesture to this menace, took two steps towards the Béguine.

“Learn,” said the latter, “to know the fidelity, the discretion, the honor of the friends you have abandoned,” and she suddenly raised her mask.

“Madame de Chevreuse!” cried the queen.

“The only living sharer of your Majesty’s secret.”

“Oh!” murmured Anne of Austria, “come and embrace me, duchess. Alas! you are killing your friend when you play thus with her mortal griefs;” and the queen, leaning her head upon the shoulder of the old duchess, broke into a storm of bitter tears.

“How young you are still!” said the latter, in a hoarse voice. “You can weep!”

CHAPTER IV.

TWO FRIENDS.

THE queen gazed fixedly at Madame de Chevreuse, and said: “I believe you pronounced the word ‘happy’ in speaking of me. Until this moment, duchess, I had thought it impossible that a being could be found on earth less happy than the queen of France.”

“Madame, you have, indeed, been a mother of sorrows. But besides these august sorrows of which we were just speaking, — we two old friends, parted by the wickedness of man, —

apart from these, I say, you have joys, not obvious, it may be, but greatly envied by the world."

"What are they?" cried Anne of Austria, bitterly. "How can you pronounce the word 'joy,' duchess, you who even now admitted that I stood in need of cure, both in body and soul."

Madame de Chevreuse reflected a moment. "How far kings are from other mortals!" she murmured.

"How mean you, duchess?"

"I mean that they are so far removed from vulgar cares that they forget what are the bare necessities of life for others. They are like the mountaineer in Africa, who looks down from his fertile tableland, refreshed by snow-torrents, and does not comprehend how the dweller on the plain below is dying of hunger and thirst in his sun-scorched desert."

The queen colored slightly, for she began to understand. "It was cruel," she said, "to cast you off like this."

"Oh, Madame! the King, they say, has inherited the hatred which his father bore me. The King would dismiss me if he knew of my being in the Palais-Royal."

"I do not say that the King is well disposed towards you," replied the queen, "but I could have — secretly, you know —" The duchess gave a slightly disdainful smile, which disconcerted the queen. "You did perfectly right to come to me," she added hastily.

"Thanks, Madame."

"If it were only to give us the joy of no longer believing you dead."

"Has it, indeed, been reported that I was dead?"

"Everywhere."

"And yet my children are not in mourning?"

"Ah! you know, duchess, that the court moves about frequently. We rarely see M. Albert de Luynes, and many things escape us amidst the constant preoccupations of our lives."

"Your Majesty should not have credited the rumor of my death."

"Why not? Alas! we are all mortal. Do you not perceive that I, your younger sister, as we used to say, am declining towards the tomb?"

"If your Majesty believed in my death, you must have wondered at having received no last message from me."

"Death often takes us by surprise, duchess."

"Oh, your Majesty! souls burdened with such secrets as these of which we were speaking feel a need of divulging them before the end; amongst the stages on the road to eternity we must always count the setting of our papers in order."

The queen started.

"Your Majesty will have sure tidings of the day of my death."

"How is that?"

"Your Majesty will receive on the following day, under double wrappings, all that has escaped destruction of our voluminous correspondence of former days."

"You have not burnt it?" cried Anne in affright.

"Only traitors destroy a royal correspondence."

"And why traitors?"

"They make at least a pretence of burning what they really keep or sell."

"Great Heavens!"

"Faithful friends, on the contrary, bury such treasures sacredly. Then some day they seek out the queen and say to her: 'Madame, I am growing old, I am ill and near my end. For me there is danger of death, and for your Majesty, of the revelation of your secret. Take, therefore, these dangerous papers and burn them yourself.'"

"Dangerous papers! What are they?"

"In this case there is but one, it is true, but it is a very dangerous one."

"Oh, duchess, speak, speak!"

"It is this note — dated the 2d of August, 1644 — in which you request me to go to Noisy-le-Sec and seek out that dear and unhappy child. It is there in your own writing, madame, 'dear, unhappy child.'"

There was a profound silence at this moment. The queen was sounding the depths of memory; Madame de Chevreuse was laying her snares.

"Yes, unhappy, most unhappy!" murmured Anne of Austria. "How sad was the existence of that poor child ending in such a cruel death."

"He is dead!" cried the duchess, with an eager curiosity which the queen recognized as genuine.

"He died of consumption, wilted and forgotten like the poor flowers given by a lover to his mistress, and left by her to fall to ashes in some secret drawer where she has hidden them."

"Dead!" repeated the duchess, in a tone of discouragement, which might have cheered the queen had it not been tempered by a mixture of doubt. "Did he die at Noisy-le-Sec?"

"Yes, in the arms of the governor, a poor faithful servant who did not long survive him."

"That is easy to imagine; such a secret and such mourning are a heavy load to bear."

The queen did not trouble herself to weigh the irony of this speech, and Madame de Chevreuse went on: "Well, Madame, I inquired at Noisy-le-Sec a few years ago for this poor child. They informed me that he was not believed to be really dead. This was why I did not at once mingle my tears with your Majesty's. If I had indeed believed in the deplorable event, no illusion of mine should have come to awaken your legitimate regrets."

"You say that at Noisy they did not believe the child to be dead?"

"No, Madame."

"What, then, did they say of him?"

"They said—but doubtless they were mistaken—they said that one evening, about the year 1645, a lady, beautiful and stately, a lady of the highest quality—as was apparent in spite of her mask and mantle—had driven up in a coach to the junction of the cross-roads—the very spot, you remember, where I was in the habit of waiting for tidings of the young prince, when your Majesty deigned to send me—"

"Well! and what else did they say?"

"That the governor had brought the child to this lady—"

"And then?"

"And that on the following day both governor and child had left that part of the country."

"Ah, you see. There is some semblance of truth in the story, for the poor child died from one of those sudden strokes of illness which cause doctors to say that the life of a child up to seven years old hangs by a thread."

"What your Majesty says is true; no one knows it better than you, no one believes it more than I—and yet there is this strange circumstance—"

"What more?" thought the queen.

"The person who repeated these details to me—the one whom I had sent to inquire as to the child's health—"

"You confided such an office to another? oh, duchess!"

"To some one as dumb as your Majesty, as dumb as myself; let us say that it was I, Madame. This person travelling shortly after in Touraine —"

"Touraine?"

"Recognized the governor and the child — or, pardon me, I should say thought to recognize them, both alive and both gay and flourishing, one in his green old age, the other in the flower of his youth! Judge from this what faith we can place in rumors upon any subject in the world. But I am wearying your Majesty, I fear, and it is far from my intention. I beg, therefore, to take my leave, after renewing the assurance of my respectful devotion."

"Stay, duchess, let us talk a little of yourself."

"Oh, Madame, do not turn your thoughts so low!"

"Why should I not? Are you not my oldest friend? You do not bear me a grudge, duchess?"

"I? Good heavens, for what cause? Should I seek out your Majesty if I cherished a grudge in my heart?"

"Duchess, the years are gaining fast upon us — as death threatens us, we must draw closer together."

"Madame, you overwhelm me by the kindness of your words."

"No one has ever loved me or served me like you, duchess."

"Your Majesty remembers, then?"

"Always! I beg you, duchess, to give me some proof of your friendship."

"Oh, madame, I belong body and soul to your Majesty."

"Ah! but the proof!"

"What shall it be?"

"Ask some favor of me."

"Ask —"

"Yes. Oh, I know that you have the greatest, the most disinterested, the most loyal soul."

"Do not praise me too highly," said the duchess, growing uneasy.

"I can never praise you as you deserve."

"But age and sorrow can change us greatly, Madame."

"Heaven grant it, duchess! For the duchess of old days — the beautiful, proud, adored Chevreuse — would have answered ungratefully, 'I want nothing from you.' Blessed be sorrow if it has indeed come, since it may have changed you in this respect, so that you will now answer, 'I accept.'"

The duchess's look and smile softened; she was under the spell and no longer dissembled.

"Speak, dearest one, what do you desire?"

"I may speak frankly, then?"

"Do so, without hesitation."

"Your Majesty can grant me an indescribable, an incomparable joy."

"Speak openly," said the queen, in a tone which anxiety made perceptibly colder, "but above all, my good Chevreuse, remember that I am under my son's control now, as formerly under my husband's."

"I will spare you, my beloved queen."

"Call me Anne, as you once did; it will sound like a far-off echo of our beautiful youth."

"So be it, my revered mistress, my beloved Anne —"

"Do you speak Spanish still?"

"Just as of old."

"Ask me in Spanish, then."

"It is this. Do me the honor to come to Dampierre and spend a few days with me."

"Is that all?" cried the queen, in amazement.

"Yes."

"Only that?"

"Good Heavens! Do you fancy that I am not asking for the greatest of boons in asking this? If so, you no longer know me. Do you accept?"

"With all my heart. And I shall be glad," added the queen, with some distrust, "if my presence there can be useful to you in any way."

"Useful!" cried the duchess, with a laugh. "Oh, no, no! but agreeable, sweet, delightful, a thousand times yes! It is a promise, then?"

"It is a vow."

The duchess bowed over the queen's beautiful hand, and covered it with kisses.

"She is a good woman at heart, after all," thought the queen, "and — a generous soul."

"Would your Majesty consent to grant me a fortnight's delay before coming?"

"Certainly. But why?"

"For this reason," said the duchess; "knowing that I am in disgrace, no one would be willing to lend me the hundred

thousand crowns I need to put Dampierre in a state of repair; but when they know that it is in order to entertain your Majesty all the funds in Paris will flow in upon me."

"Ah," said the queen, nodding her head slowly with perfect comprehension, "a hundred thousand crowns! You require a hundred thousand to restore Dampierre?"

"Not a crown less."

"And no one will lend you that sum?"

"No one."

"I will lend it to you if you wish, duchess."

"Oh, I should not venture —"

"You would be quite wrong, then —"

"Truly?"

"On my faith as a queen. A hundred thousand crowns is really not much. Oh, I am sure you have never asked a sufficiently high price for your discretion. Duchess, draw up that table, and I will make out a bond on M. Colbert — no, on M. Fouquet, he is a much more gallant gentleman."

"But does he pay?"

"If he does not pay, I will; but it will be the first time he has ever refused me."

The queen wrote, presented the order to the duchess, and dismissed her, after embracing her gayly.

CHAPTER V.

HOW JEAN DE LA FONTAINE CAME TO WRITE HIS FIRST TALE.

ALL these intrigues are now exhausted. The human mind, so varied in its workings, has had full liberty to unfold itself in the three spheres offered by our narrative. It is possible that we may still treat of politics and intrigues in the sketch we are preparing to draw, but their springs will be so carefully hidden that only flowers and ornaments will be visible — just as in a puppet show a Colossus appears on the stage, moved by the small legs and frail arms of a child concealed within his frame.

We will now return to Saint-Mandé, where the superintendent, according to his custom, is receiving a choice company of Epicureans.

For some time past the host has been severely straitened, and the whole house has borne witness to the distress of the minister. No more reckless and prodigal banquets. Finance has been Fouquet's pretext, and never, as Gourville wittily observed, was a more fallacious pretext, for of finances there was not a trace.

M. Vatel still strove to keep up the reputation of the house, but already the gardeners who supplied the kitchen were complaining of ruinous delays; the importers of Spanish wines were continually sending bills which no one paid; fishermen, whom the superintendent employed on the Normandy coast, reckoned that if they should be reimbursed their receipts would enable them to give up the sea forever, but in the meantime the fresh fish which were eventually to be the cause of Vatel's death had ceased to come in at all.

Nevertheless, on his customary reception day Fouquet's friends had arrived in greater numbers than usual. Gourville and the Abbé Fouquet were discussing finance—that is to say, the abbé was borrowing a few pistoles of Gourville. Péliisson, seated with his legs crossed, was reciting the peroration of a speech with which Fouquet was to open parliament; and this speech was a marvellous one, inasmuch as Péliisson was composing it for his friend, and putting into it everything which the latter was most unlikely to think of himself.

Presently La Fontaine and Loret entered from the garden, eagerly discussing the use of weak rhymes; the painters and musicians were hovering near the dining-hall. On the stroke of eight supper was to be served, and the superintendent never kept the company waiting.

It was already half after seven, and the guests were in fine appetite. As soon as all the company were assembled, Gourville went up to Péliisson, roused him from his reverie and led him into the centre of the salon, after closing the doors. "And now, what tidings have you brought?" he asked; Péliisson, raising his mild, intelligent face, replied:

"I have borrowed twenty-five thousand livres from my aunt. Here they are in treasury bonds."

"Good!" cried Gourville, "there are only one hundred and ninety-five thousand livres wanting for our first payment."

"The payment of what?" asked La Fontaine, in the tone in which he might have asked: "Have you read the book of Baruch?"

"There is our absent-minded friend again!" cried Gourville. "What! it was you who first informed us that the small estate of Corbeil was about to be sold by a creditor of M. Fouquet's; it was you who proposed that all the friends of our Epicurus should subscribe to save it; it was you who offered to sell a corner of your land at Château-Thierry in order to provide your share. And now you come and ask: '*The payment of what?*'"

A general laugh greeted this remark, and caused La Fontaine to blush.

"Pardon me," he said, "it is quite true. I had not forgotten — oh, not at all! only —"

"Only you did not happen to remember," said Loret.

"That is it precisely; and as you say, there is a great difference between forgetting and not remembering."

"Then doubtless," remarked Péliisson, "you have brought your mite with you, the price of the land you sold."

"Sold! oh, no!"

"You have not sold your bit of garden?" asked Gourville in amazement, as he well knew the poet's disinterested nature.

"My wife would not let me," answered the latter, upon which there was another burst of laughter.

"And yet you went to Château-Thierry for that purpose," some one remarked.

"Certainly, on horseback."

"Poor Jean!"

"I had eight different horses; I was shaken to pieces."

"Excellent friend! — but you rested when you reached there?"

"Rested! so you may think — but I can tell you, I did a fine piece of work down there."

"How was that?"

"My wife had been coquetting with the man to whom I meant to sell my land, and he had backed down from his bargain. Thereupon I challenged him."

"Well done!" rejoined his brother-poet; "and so you fought?"

"It appears not."

"You know nothing about it, then?"

"No, my wife and her relations interfered in the matter. I stood with sword in hand for a good quarter of an hour, but I came off without a scratch."

"And your adversary too?"

"Yes, the adversary too; he did not appear on the field."

"That was perfect!" cried all his friends, "you must have been in a fine rage."

"I was indeed! I caught cold; I went back into the house and my wife and I had a quarrel."

"A serious one?"

"Very serious; she threw a loaf of bread at my head, a large loaf."

"And you?"

"I? Oh, I overturned the table upon her and her friends. Then I mounted my horse and rode away."

None of the company could restrain their mirth over this tragi-comedy. When the storm of laughter had somewhat subsided, "Is that all you have brought back?" some one asked.

"Oh, not at all! I have brought back an excellent idea."

"What is it?"

"Have you happened to notice that a great deal of comic poetry is being written in France?"

"Without doubt," replied the company.

"And that very little of it is printed?" pursued La Fontaine.

"The laws are severe, it is true."

"Well, I said to myself, a rare article is a dear article. For that reason I set about composing an extremely licentious little poem."

"Oh, oh, dear poet!"

"A very ribald poem."

"Oh, oh!"

"Excessively cynical."

"Oh, the devil!"

"I have put into it," proceeded the poet, coolly, "the very freest language I could possibly find."

Every one was convulsed with laughter, while the worthy poet proceeded to label his merchandise.

"I undertook," he went on, "to surpass all that Boccaccio, Aretino, and other masters have produced in that style."

"Good Heavens!" cried Pélisson, "he is a lost soul."

"Do you think so?" asked La Fontaine, simply. "I swear to you that I did not do it for myself, but only for M. Fouquet."

This marvellous conclusion set a climax to the satisfaction of his audience.

"And I have sold the first edition of this little book for eight hundred livres," he cried, rubbing his hands. "Works of piety sell for half that price."

"It might have been better," laughed Gourville, "to write two works of piety."

"They would have been too long and not so diverting," retorted La Fontaine, tranquilly. "My eight hundred livres are in this little bag. I offer them to you."

And he at once placed his offering in the hands of the treasurer of the Epicureans.

Next it was the turn of Loret, who gave a hundred and fifty livres. The others emptied their purses likewise, until the total in the bag amounted to forty thousand livres. Never did more generous coin ring in the heavenly scales in which charity weighs kind hearts and good-will against the false coin of devout hypocrisy.

The crowns were still jingling when the superintendent entered or rather glided into the room. He had heard all. Thereupon this man, who had handled many billions, who had exhausted every pleasure and every honor, — this immense heart and fertile brain which, like two burning crucibles, had sucked up all the material and moral treasure of the greatest kingdom in the world — Fouquet crossed the threshold with his eyes full of tears; and as he let this stream of gold and silver flow through his white and slender fingers he said in faltering accents: "Poor offering! you would be lost in the smallest fold of my empty purse, but you have filled my heart to the brim so that it can never be empty again. Thanks, my friends, thanks!" and as he could not embrace all those who surrounded him and who were shedding a few tears also, philosophers though they were, he embraced La Fontaine, exclaiming:

"My poor fellow, who has been beaten by his wife and sent to perdition by his confessor on my account!"

"Oh, that is nothing," replied the poet. "If your creditors will only wait two years I shall have written a hundred more tales, which, at two editions each, will pay off the debt."

CHAPTER VI.

LA FONTAINE AS A NEGOTIATOR.

Fouquet pressed La Fontaine's hand with charming effusion. "My dear poet," he said to him, "write us a hundred more tales, not only for the eighty pistoles which each will bring in, but for the sake of enriching our language with a hundred masterpieces."

"Ah, ah!" cried La Fontaine, bridling, "you must not think I have brought nothing but this idea and these eighty pistoles to M. le Surintendant."

"Oh, indeed!" was the general exclamation. "M. de la Fontaine is in funds."

"Blessed be the idea if it brings me in a million or so," said Fouquet, gayly.

"Precisely so," replied La Fontaine.

"Quick, quick! what is it?" cried the company.

"Take care!" murmured Pélisson in La Fontaine's ear. "You have had great success so far; do not shoot your arrow beyond the mark."

"Not at all, M. Pélisson. You who are a man of taste will be the first to commend me."

"Is it a question of millions?" asked Gourville.

"I have fifteen hundred thousand livres here, M. Gourville," and he struck his breast.

"The deuce take the Gascon from Château-Thierry!" cried Loret.

"It is not the pocket you should touch, but the brain," said Fouquet.

"Upon my word!" rejoined La Fontaine, "M. le Surintendant, you are not a minister, you are a poet."

"That is true," cried Conrart, Loret, and every man-of-letters in the company.

"You are, I repeat, a painter and a poet, a sculptor and a patron of the arts and sciences, but you will acknowledge yourself that you are no lawyer."

"I admit it," replied Fouquet, smiling.

"And if you were asked to join the academy, you would probably decline."

"I fear I should; without offence to messieurs the academicians."

"Why, then, since you will not be a member of the academy, do you consent to be a member of parliament?"

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed Péliſson, "we are talking politics."

"I am merely asking whether a lawyer's gown does or does not become M. Fouquet."

"It is not a mere question of gown," retorted Péliſson, annoyed by the laughter of the company.

"On the contrary, the gown is the question," said Loret.

"Take away the gown from the procureur-général," said Conrart, "and we still have M. Fouquet, of which we certainly shall not complain; but since there can be no procureur-général without his gown, we agree with M. de la Fontaine that the gown is the bugbear."

"*Fugiunt risus leporesque*," said Loret.

"Laughter and the graces," translated a scholar.

"It is not so that I should translate *lepores*," pursued Péliſson, gravely.

"And how do you translate it?" asked La Fontaine.

"The hares take to flight on seeing M. Fouquet."

Shouts of laughter arose, in which the superintendent joined.

"But why say 'hares'?" objected Conrart.

"Because the hare is he who does not rejoice at seeing M. Fouquet retaining his power through his parliamentary position."

"Oh, oh!" murmured the poets.

"*Quo non ascendam*," observed Conrart, "seems to me impossible in a procureur's gown."

"And to me it seems impossible without it," insisted the obstinate Péliſson. "What think you, Gourville?"

"I think the gown is all very well," replied the latter, "but a million and a half is better."

"And I am of Gourville's opinion," cried Fouquet, cutting short the discussion.

"A million and a half!" muttered Péliſson, "*pardieu!* I know an Indian fable —"

"Relate it to me," said La Fontaine; "I ought to know it, too."

"Tell it, tell it!" cried the others.

"The tortoise had a shell," said Péliſson, "in which he took refuge when he was threatened by his enemies. One day some one said to him: 'You must be very warm all summer in a house like that, and besides, it prevents your exhibiting your graces; yonder is an adder who will give you a million and a half for your shell.'"

"Good!" said the superintendent, laughing.

"And what next?" asked La Fontaine, much more interested in the fable than in the moral.

"The tortoise sold his shell, and was left naked and defenceless. A vulture saw him thus, and being hungry, broke his back with one blow of the beak, and devoured him. The moral is, that M. Fouquet would do well to keep his gown."

La Fontaine took the moral seriously.

"You forget Æschylus," he said to his adversary.

"What do you mean?"

"Æschylus was bold, as you know. One day a vulture — your vulture, probably — a great amateur of tortoises, looking down on his bald head, mistook it for a stone, and dropped a tortoise on it shell and all."

"Yes, upon my word! La Fontaine is right," mused Fouquet. "Whenever a vulture is hungry for tortoises, it knows how to break their shells gratis; lucky are these tortoises for whose shell an adder is willing to pay a million and a half! Only bring me an adder as generous as the one in your fable, Péliçon and I will thankfully let him have my shell."

"*Rara avis in terris!*" quoth Conrart.

"A perfect black swan, is he not?" added La Fontaine. "Well, just such a bird have I found, black and very rare."

"You have found a purchaser for my post of procureur?" cried Fouquet.

"Yes, monsieur."

"But M. le Surintendant has never said that he wished to sell," rejoined Péliçon.

"Excuse me; you yourself have spoken to me of it."

"I am a witness to it," remarked Gourville.

"He is tenacious in regard to his beautiful idea," said Fouquet, smiling. "Come, La Fontaine, who is this purchaser?"

"A real blackbird, a counsellor to parliament, a very worthy man."

"And his name?"

"Vanel."

"What! Vanel?" cried Fouquet, "the husband of —"

"Precisely — her husband; yes, monsieur."

"The dear man!" exclaimed Fouquet, in a tone of deep interest, "he wishes to be procureur-général?"

"He wishes to be all that you are, monsieur," said Gourville, "and to do absolutely what you have done."

"Oh, this is very diverting; tell us the whole story, La Fontaine."

"It is very simple; I see him from time to time, and a little while ago I met him, lounging about the Place de la Bastille, at the very moment when I was taking the coach for Saint-Mandé."

"He was doubtless on the watch for his wife," interrupted Loret.

"Oh, not at all!" said Fouquet, simply, "he is not jealous."

"He greeted me," pursued La Fontaine, "embraced me, and led me into the wine shop of L'Image Saint-Fiacre and there told me all his troubles."

"Ah, he has troubles?"

"Yes, his wife is ambitious for him."

"And he told you —"

"That some one had suggested a parliamentary post to him, that M. Fouquet's name had been mentioned, and that from that day Madame Vanel dreams of nothing but being Madame la Procureuse-Générale, and that she is dying of it every night she is not dreaming of it."

"The deuce!"

"Poor woman!" said Fouquet.

"Wait a moment! Conrart is always telling me that I know nothing of business; you shall see how I conducted this —"

"Let us hear!"

"'But you know,' I said, 'that a post like M. Fouquet's costs dear.'"

"'About how much?' he asked.

"'M. Fouquet has refused seventeen hundred thousand livres for it.'"

"'My wife,' replied Vanel, 'had reckoned it at fourteen hundred thousand.'"

"'In ready money?' I asked.

"'Yes; she has sold an estate she owned in Guienne. She is in funds.'"

"That is a very pretty sum to come into at one stroke!" remarked the Abbé Fouquet, sententiously. It was the first time he had spoken.

"That poor Madame Vanel!" sighed Fouquet.

Péllisson shrugged his shoulders.

"A demon!" he whispered to Fouquet.

"Precisely. Would it not be charming to spend this

demon's money in repairing the wrong which an angel has incurred for my sake?"

Péliston gazed with astonishment at Fouquet, whose thoughts turned from this moment towards a new object.

"Well," inquired La Fontaine, "what do you say to my negotiation?"

"It is admirable, dear poet."

"Yes," said Gourville, "but many a man talks of buying a horse who has no money to pay for a bridle."

"This Vanel would back down if he were taken at his word," added the Abbé Fouquet.

"I think not," said La Fontaine. "You have still to hear the *dénouement* of my story."

"Ah! it has a *dénouement*!" exclaimed Gourville. "Why do we loiter by the way, then?"

"*Semper ad adventum* — am I right?" ventured Fouquet, in the tone of a man of quality who fears to blunder into barbarisms.

The Latinists applauded vigorously.

"My *dénouement*," cried La Fontaine, "is that Vanel, that tenacious blackbird, finding that I was on my way to Saint-Mandé, begged me to bring him with me, and to present him, if possible, to M. Fouquet."

"So that —"

"So that he is here; I left him on the lawn of Bel-Air. What shall be done with him, M. Fouquet?"

"Well, it is not fitting that Madame Vanel's husband should be catching cold on my lawn. Send and bring him in, La Fontaine, since you know where he is to be found."

"I will go for him myself."

"And I will accompany you," said the Abbé Fouquet, "to bring back the money-bags."

"No foolish jesting," said Fouquet, severely; "let the business be carried on seriously if at all. In the first place, let us be hospitable. Make my apologies to the gentleman, La Fontaine, and assure him that I am in despair at having kept him waiting, but that I was not aware of his presence."

La Fontaine was already far away. Fortunately, Gourville accompanied him, for the poet, absorbed in his own meditations, was hurrying in the direction of Saint-Maur.

A quarter of an hour later M. Vanel was introduced into the superintendent's cabinet, the same which we have already described in the opening pages of this narrative.

Fouquet, seeing him enter, called Pélisson and spoke a few words in his ear. "Attend closely to my instructions," he said; "have all the gold and silver plate and all the jewels packed into the carriage; you will take the black horses; the jeweller will accompany you; you must put off the supper until Madame de Bellière arrives."

"And we must notify Madame de Bellière, must we not?"

"It is not necessary; I will look to that. Go, my friend."

Pélisson departed, wholly in the dark, but confiding, as do all true friends, in the will to which they submit their own. Therein lies the strength of a devoted soul; distrust belongs to inferior natures. Vanel, in the meantime, had made his bow to the superintendent, and was about to open the conversation.

"Sit down, monsieur," said Fouquet, civilly; "it seems you wish to purchase my office in parliament."

"Monseigneur —"

"How much can you give me for it?"

"It is for monseigneur to name a price. I know that you have had offers for it."

"Madame Vanel, I am told, estimates it at fourteen hundred thousand livres."

"That is all we possess."

"Can you produce the sum at once?"

"I have not the money with me," said Vanel, awkwardly, abashed by this simplicity, this grandeur, where he had anticipated a contest, much diplomacy, and many wily moves on the chess-board.

"When can you have it?"

"Whenever it suits monseigneur;" and he trembled lest Fouquet should be playing with him.

"If it were not for the trouble of your returning to Paris I should say at once."

"Oh, monseigneur!"

"However," interrupted the superintendent, "we will leave the settlement and signatures until to-morrow morning."

"So be it," replied Vanel, stunned and bewildered.

"At six o'clock," added Fouquet.

"At six," repeated Vanel.

"Adieu, M. Vanel. Say to Madame Vanel that I kiss her hand," and Fouquet rose.

Thereupon Vanel, who had begun to lose his head, exclaimed:

"Monseigneur, monseigneur ! do you give me your word ?"

Fouquet turned his head : "*Pardieu !*" he said ; "and you ?"

Vanel hesitated, shivered, and ended by timidly offering his hand. Fouquet held out his and clasped it freely and nobly. The loyal hand rested for a moment in the clammy palm of the hypocrite. Vanel pressed Fouquet's fingers hard in order to convince himself more fully. The latter gently disengaged his hand.

"Adieu," he said. Vanel backed hastily towards the door, retreated into the corridor, and fled.

CHAPTER VII.

MADAME DE BELLIÈRE'S PLATE AND DIAMONDS.

WHEN Fouquet had dismissed Vanel he reflected for a while. "A man cannot do too much," he said to himself, "for a woman he has loved. Marguerite wishes to be the wife of a procureur, why not give her that pleasure ? Now that the most scrupulous conscience can have nothing with which to reproach me, I can turn my thoughts to the woman who loves me. Madame de Bellière must be there by this time," and he turned towards the secret door. Then, having shut himself in, he opened the subterranean passage connecting the house at Vincennes with his own house. He had neglected to warn his friend of his approach by ringing the bell, but he felt assured that she would not fail to be at the rendezvous. The marquise had in fact already arrived, and was awaiting him. The noise made by the superintendent gave her warning, and she ran to take the note which he slipped under the door for her, and which said : "Come, marquise, we are waiting supper for you."

Happy and full of life, Madame de Bellière gained her carriage in the avenue at Vincennes, and was soon upon the terrace, where Gourville, to please his master, was standing ready to give her his hand.

She had not seen Fouquet's black horses gallop up, smoking and white with foam, bringing back to Saint-Mandé both Pélisson and the goldsmith, to whom Madame de Bellière had sold her plate and jewels. Pélisson introduced this man into the cabi-

net, which Fouquet had not yet left. The latter thanked the jeweller for having been willing to keep as a deposit property which he had the right to dispose of. He cast his eye over the total of the bill, which amounted to thirteen hundred thousand livres; then turning to his desk he wrote a draft for fourteen hundred thousand livres, payable at sight, on his treasury, before noon on the following day.

"A profit of one hundred thousand livres!" cried the goldsmith. "Oh, monseigneur, what generosity!"

"Not at all, not at all, monsieur," replied Fouquet, tapping him lightly on the shoulder; "there are courtesies that cannot be repaid. The profit is about what you would have made yourself, but there still remains the interest on your money;" and with these words he unfastened from his cuff a diamond button, which this same jeweller had many a time estimated at three thousand pistoles. "Take this as a remembrance of me," he said to the goldsmith; "you are an honest man."

"And you," cried the goldsmith, deeply touched, "you, monseigneur, are a noble gentleman."

Fouquet dismissed the worthy man by a secret door, and then went to receive Madame de Bellière, around whom the guests had all gathered. The marquise was always beautiful, but this evening her loveliness was dazzling.

"Do you not perceive, gentlemen," Fouquet said, "that madame is incomparably beautiful to-night? Do you know the reason?"

"It is simply because madame is the most beautiful of women," said one.

"No, it is because she is the best, and yet —"

"And yet?" said the marquise, smiling.

"Yet all the jewels madame is wearing to-night are false."

She blushed slightly at this.

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed all the guests, "you can say that without fear in regard to a lady who possesses the finest diamonds in Paris."

"Well, what think you?" whispered Fouquet to Pélisson.

"I understand all at last," he replied, "and you have done well."

"That is fortunate," laughed the superintendent.

"Monseigneur is served," announced Vatel, majestically.

The throng of guests hastened towards the dining-hall with more speed than is customary at ministerial banquets, and

there a magnificent spectacle awaited them. Upon the buffets, the sideboards, the supper table itself, in the midst of flowers and lights, blazed the most superb gold and silver service imaginable; a relic of the ancient splendors which Florentine artists in the train of the Medicis had cast, wrought, and chiselled for them while there was still gold in France. These hidden treasures, buried during the civil wars, had been shyly brought to light in the intervals of that war of good taste known as the Fronde, when nobles fighting against nobles killed but never pillaged each other. All this plate was engraved with the arms of Madame de Bellière.

"Look!" cried Fouquet, "here is a P. and a B."

But the most remarkable sight of all was at the place assigned to the marquise by Fouquet; beside her plate rose a pyramid of diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, antique cameos, sardonyx stones engraved by the Greeks of Asia Minor, with settings of Mysian gold; curious antique mosaics from Alexandria mounted in silver; massive bracelets from the Egypt of Cleopatra, were heaped up upon a vast platter of Palissy ware, supported on a tripod of gold-bronze sculptured by Benvenuto. The marquise turned pale on beholding these jewels which she had never expected to see again; a profound silence, such as precedes an outburst of intense emotion, pervaded the excited company. Fouquet did not even signal to dismiss the host of gorgeous lackeys who were hurrying like a swarm of bees between the great buffets and the serving-tables.

"Gentlemen," he said, "all this plate which you see before you belongs to Madame de Bellière, who one day, finding that one of her friends was in difficulties, sent all this gold and silver to the goldsmith, with this mass of jewels which are piled up before her. This noble action of a friend should be appreciated by such friends as you. Happy the man who finds himself so loved! Let us pledge the health of Madame de Bellière!"

An immense outburst of applause drowned his words, and caused the poor lady to fall back half fainting in her chair, stunned as the birds of Greece were stunned when they flew over the race-course at Olympia.

"And now," said Péliisson, whom all virtue touched and all beauty fascinated, "let us also pledge him who inspired madame's noble deed! For such a man must be worthy of being loved."

It was now the turn of the marquise. She rose, pale and smiling, held out her glass with a trembling hand, whose fingers just touched Fouquet's, while her moistened eyes turned towards his, to meet the love burning in that generous heart.

With this heroic prelude the supper soon became a festival; and as every one ceased to aim at being witty, all became doubly so. La Fontaine forgot his Gorgny wine, and allowed Vatel to reconcile him to the wines of Spain and the Rhine. The Abbé Fouquet became so amiable that Gourville warned him:

"Take care, abbé! you are growing so tender that some one will eat you."

Thus the joyous hours flew by, showering roses on the guests. Contrary to his habit, the superintendent did not retire from the table before the dessert. He smiled around upon these friends, all in that joyous mood, when hearts are intoxicated before the heads; then, for the first time, he glanced at the clock.

Suddenly a carriage rolled into the court-yard, and, strange to say, all heard it amidst the tumult and the songs. Fouquet listened intently and then turned his eyes towards the ante-chamber. It seemed to him that he heard a step, and that this step instead of treading the floor was treading on his heart. Instinctively his foot drew away from the foot of Madame de Bellière, which had been resting on his for the last two hours.

"M. d'Herblay, Bishop of Vannes!" announced the usher; and the pensive, sombre face of Aramis appeared in the doorway between the fragments of two broken garlands whose thread the flame of a lamp had just severed.

CHAPTER VIII.

M. DE MAZARIN'S RECEIPT.

FOUQUET would have uttered a cry of joy on seeing another friend, if Aramis' chilling air and preoccupied look had not restored all his reserve.

"Will you join us over our dessert?" he asked, "or are you dismayed at the noise of our revelry?"

"Monseigneur," replied Aramis, respectfully, "I must first ask your pardon for intruding on this joyous meeting; then I

must beg, when the festivity is over, for a few moments' audience on important business."

As this word "business" had caused several of the Epicureans to prick up their ears, Fouquet rose.

"Business first always, M. d'Herblay," he said; "we are only too fortunate in having it arrive at the close of our banquet."

Thereupon he offered his hand to Madame de Bellière, who was gazing at him anxiously, and led her into the adjoining salon, where he intrusted her to the care of some of the more rational of the company.

Then taking Aramis by the arm, he led him into his cabinet.

Aramis, once there, forgot deference and etiquette; he seated himself at once and began:

"Whom do you think I have seen this evening?"

"My dear chevalier, whenever you begin like that I am sure that you have something disagreeable to announce."

"Once more you are not mistaken, my dear friend," replied Aramis.

"Do not keep me in suspense," pursued Fouquet, coolly.

"Well, then, I have seen Madame de Chevreuse."

"The old duchess?"

"Yes."

"Or her ghost?"

"Not at all. The old she-wolf herself."

"Without teeth."

"Yes, possibly, but not without claws."

"Very well! but why should she bear me malice? I am not stingy with any women, except prudish ones. That is a merit in the eyes of a woman who no longer aspires to charm."

"Madame de Chevreuse knows very well that you are not stingy, since she is about to try and extort money from you."

"Good! On what pretext?"

"Ah, pretexts are never wanting to her. Here is her present one."

"I am listening."

"It seems that the duchess is in possession of several letters from M. de Mazarin."

"That does not surprise me. He was a very gallant prelate."

"Yes, but these letters have no connection with the prelate's love affairs. They deal, it appears, with financial matters."

"That is far less interesting."

"You have no suspicion of what I am about to tell you?"

"None whatever."

"Have you never heard that you had been accused of embezzling the public funds?"

"A thousand times, my dear D'Herblay. Since I have been at the head of affairs I have heard nothing else. It is just as they accuse you, a bishop, of impiety, you, the musketeer, of cowardice — that of which they always accuse a minister of finance is of stealing the public money."

"Yes, but let us specify, since M. de Mazarin specifies, according to the duchess."

"Let us hear what he specifies."

"Something like thirteen millions, the disposal of which you would be greatly embarrassed to disclose."

"Thirteen millions!" mused the superintendent, stretching himself at full length in his chair and gazing up at the ceiling. "Thirteen millions; ah, faith! I am looking for them, you see, among all the rest I have been accused of stealing."

"Do not laugh, my dear monsieur, this is a very serious matter. It is certain that the duchess has these letters, and that they must be genuine since she proposes to sell them for five hundred thousand livres."

"One can get a very pretty calumny at that price," rejoined Fouquet. "Ah! but now I know what you mean," and he began to laugh heartily.

"So much the better!" exclaimed Aramis, slightly reassured.

"The story of these thirteen millions comes back to me. Yes, it must be that; I have it."

"I am rejoiced to hear it. Tell me about them."

"Listen, then! One day Signor Mazarin — God rest his soul! — made a profit of thirteen millions out of a concession of contested lands in the Valteline. He scratched them off the register of receipts, sent them to me, and proceeded to make me advance them to him for war expenses."

"Very good! The use to which they were put is then clearly proved."

"Not at all; the cardinal had them entered under my name and sent me a receipt."

"And you have that receipt?"

"*Parbleu!*" said Fouquet, and he rose tranquilly to look

for it in the drawers of his great ebony desk, encrusted with enamel and silver.

"What I admire in you," said Aramis, highly charmed, "is first your memory, next your self-possession, and finally the perfect order that reigns in your affairs — you, the poet *par excellence*."

"Yes," replied Fouquet, "I am orderly through indolence, to spare myself the trouble of searching for things. Thus I know that Mazarin's receipt is in the third drawer, under the letter M. I open the drawer and put my hand on the very paper I want. I could find it at night without a candle," and he fingered, with a sure hand, the papers piled up in the open drawer. "What is more," he went on, "I remember the very look of that particular paper; it was thick, gilt-edged, and a little rumpled; Mazarin had made a blot upon the figures of the date. Well!" he exclaimed, "this paper seems to know that we are looking for it, and that it has suddenly become of importance, so it rebels and hides itself." As the superintendent was peering into the drawer, Aramis rose.

"This is strange!" said Fouquet.

"Your memory has misled you, my dear monsieur; look in another drawer."

Fouquet took out the bundle of papers and examined them one by one; then he turned pale.

"Do not confine your search to that drawer," cried Aramis, "look elsewhere."

"Useless, useless! I have never made a mistake. No hand but mine ever touches these papers; no one opens this drawer, to which, as you see, I have had a secret lock made known only to myself."

"What do you conclude, then?" said Aramis, much agitated.

"That Mazarin's receipt has been stolen. Madame de Chevreuse was right, chevalier; I have embezzled the public funds; I have stolen thirteen millions. I am a thief, M. d'Herblay."

"Monsieur, monsieur! do not agitate yourself, do not become excited!"

"And why not excite myself, M. le Chevalier? There never was better reason. It needs but a good trial, a good sentence, and your friend the superintendent may follow his colleague, Enguerrand de Marigny, his predecessor Samblançay, to the scaffold of Montfaucon."

"Oh!" exclaimed Aramis, with a smile, "not so fast!"

"And why not so fast? What do you imagine, then, that Madame de Chevreuse has done with these letters? For you refused them, did you not?"

"Oh, yes, I refused them flatly. She has doubtless sold them to M. Colbert."

"Well, and what then?"

"I may say I am positive she has sold them to him, for I had her followed, and on leaving me she went straight home, then slipped out by a rear gate and betook herself at once to the intendant's house in the Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs."

"There will be a trial, then, scandal and disgrace, falling like a thunderbolt, blindly, brutally, pitilessly!"

Aramis approached Fouquet, who had sunk, shuddering, back into his armchair beside the open drawer, and laying his hand on his friend's shoulder said affectionately:

"Do not forget that M. Fouquet's position cannot be compared to that of Samblançay or Marigny."

"And why not?"

"Because those ministers were tried and sentenced, and the sentence was executed, while in your case it can never come to that."

"Once more I ask you, why not? In every age a defaulter has been held a criminal."

"Criminals who know where to find a safe asylum are never in danger."

"You would have me escape — take to flight?"

"I am not speaking of escape. You forget that trials of this sort are conducted by parliament, and are instituted by the procureur-général; and since you hold that office you see that unless you should condemn yourself —"

"Oh!" cried Fouquet, striking the table with his doubled fist.

"Well, what — what is it?"

"It is this: I am procureur-général no longer."

At this Aramis turned as pale as death. He clinched his fingers so tightly that they cracked one against another, and with a haggard glance which overwhelmed Fouquet, said in convulsive accents: "No longer procureur-général?"

"No."

"Since when?"



ARAMIS APPROACHED FOUQUET, WHO HAD SUNK, SHUDDERING, BACK INTO HIS ARM-CHAIR BESIDE THE OPEN DRAWER.

"I ceased to be so four or five hours ago."

"Take care!" broke in Aramis, coldly. "I think you cannot be in full possession of your senses, my friend. Collect yourself."

"I tell you," cried Fouquet, "that just now some one came to me, brought by my friends, to offer me fourteen hundred thousand livres for my office, and that I have sold it."

Aramis was stunned. His intelligent and mocking expression turned to one of dull terror which affected the superintendent more than all outcry or remonstrance.

"You were, then, in great need of money?"

"Yes, in order to discharge a debt of honor," and in a few words he related to Aramis the story of Madame de Bellière's generosity, and of the way in which he had felt called upon to repay that generosity.

"That was a fine deed," quoth Aramis, "and it cost you — how much?"

"Precisely the fourteen hundred thousand livres — the price of my appointment."

"Which you accepted on the spot, without reflection? Oh, imprudent friend!"

"I have not yet received the amount, but it will be handed me to-morrow."

"Then the affair is not completed?"

"It must be settled before this, for I gave the goldsmith an order upon my treasury to be paid at noon to-morrow, and the purchaser's money will have been paid in by six or seven o'clock."

"Heaven be praised!" cried Aramis, clapping his hands. "It is not final, since you have not yet paid."

"But the goldsmith?"

"You shall receive the fourteen hundred thousand livres from me before noon."

"Stay a moment! It is at six o'clock this morning that I am to sign."

"Oh, I answer for it that you will not sign."

"I have given my word, chevalier."

"If you have given it you must take it back, that is all."

"Ah! what are you saying to me?" cried Fouquet, in his frank, loyal tones; "Fouquet take back his word!"

Aramis returned the minister's reproachful glance with a look of hot indignation.

"Monsieur," he said, "I think I have deserved to be called a man of honor, have I not? As a soldier I have risked my life five hundred times; as a priest I have rendered yet greater services to the Church, to the state, and to my friends. A word is worth what the man is worth who gives it. It is pure gold so long as he keeps it, and of sharpest steel when he wishes not to keep it. He defends himself, therefore, with that word as with a sword of honor, since if he, this honorable man, disregards his word, he does so at the peril of his life; because the risk he runs is greater than any benefit he can reap from his adversary. Then, monsieur, he appeals to God and justice."

Fouquet bowed his head. "I am a poor, obstinate, vulgar Breton," he said. "My intellect can only fear and admire yours. I shall not claim that I keep my word from a sense of honor. I keep it, if you will, from force of habit; but, after all, common men are simple enough to admire that habit. It is my one virtue — leave me the honors of it."

"Then you persist in signing away your claims to this office which should be your defence against your enemies?"

"I shall sign."

Aramis heaved a deep sigh, and looked about him with the impatient air of a man who would like to dash something to pieces.

"We have still one means left," he said; "I hope you will not refuse to employ this last means."

"Certainly not, if it be loyal, as is everything you would propose, dear friend."

"I know of nothing more loyal than would be a surrender of his rights on the part of your purchaser. Is he a friend?"

"Oh, yes! But —"

"But — if you will allow me to deal with this affair. I do not despair yet."

"Oh, I leave you absolute master."

"With whom have we to deal? Who is the man?"

"I do not know whether you are familiar with the parliament."

"To a certain extent. Is he one of the presidents?"

"No; only a counsellor."

"Ah, ah!"

"Named Vanel."

Aramis turned purple. "What, Vanel!" he cried, springing from his chair. "Vanel! The husband of Marguerite Vanel?"

"Precisely."

"Of your former flame?"

"Yes, my dear fellow. She wished to be Madame la Procureuse. I certainly owed that much to poor Vanel, and I was the gainer by it, since it gave pleasure to his wife besides."

Aramis walked straight up to Fouquet and caught him by the hand.

"Do you know," he asked, coldly, "the name of Madame Vanel's new lover?"

"Ah! She has a new lover? I was not aware of it. Faith! no, I do not know his name."

"His name is Jean Baptiste Colbert; he is intendant of finance; he lives in Rue Croix-des-Petit-Champs, where Madame de Chevreuse went this evening to sell Mazarin's letters."

"My God!" murmured Fouquet, wiping his damp brow.

"You begin to understand now?"

"That I am lost? Yes."

"Do you think it worth while now to keep your word a little less strictly than Regulus?"

"No," said Fouquet.

"These stubborn men," murmured Aramis, "always contrive to make one admire them."

Fouquet held out his hand to him. At that moment a gorgeous tortoise-shell clock, with figures and hands of gold, that stood on a console opposite the fireplace, struck six. A door creaked in the corridor.

"M. Vanel," said Gourville's voice at the door of the cabinet, "wishes to know if monseigneur can receive him."

Fouquet turned his eyes away from those of Aramis, and said, "Admit M. Vanel!"

CHAPTER IX.

M. COLBERT'S ROUGH DRAFT.

VANEL entering at this point in the conversation was nothing to Fouquet or Aramis but the full stop which ends a sentence. But for Vanel the presence of Aramis in Fouquet's cabinet was a circumstance of much greater moment. Therefore the purchaser, upon his first step across the threshold, turned upon the delicate yet firm countenance of the Bishop of Vannes a look, first of amazement, then of sharp scrutiny.

As for Fouquet, a master of statecraft, — that is to say, perfect master of himself, — he had already, by supreme force of will, driven from his face all traces of the agitation caused by Aramis' revelations. He was no longer a man cast down by misfortune and reduced to expedients. He raised his head proudly as he motioned Vanel to enter. He was prime minister once more, and in his own house.

Aramis knew the superintendent of old; no evidence of the delicacy of his feelings or the force of his mind could any longer surprise him. He confined himself for the present, therefore, to the difficult rôle of the man who merely looks on and listens, with a view to learning and penetrating everything, reserving to himself the right of resuming later an active part in the colloquy.

Vanel was visibly agitated as he advanced into the middle of the room, bowing to each in turn.

"I have come —" he faltered.

Fouquet nodded slightly. "You are punctual, M. Vanel," he said.

"In business dealings, monseigneur," replied Vanel, "punctuality is, I believe, a virtue."

"Yes, monsieur."

"Pardon me," interrupted Aramis, addressing Fouquet, and indicating Vanel with his finger, "it is monsieur, is it not, who has come to purchase your appointment?"

"It is I," answered Vanel, amazed at the tone of supreme *hauteur* with which Aramis had put the question. "But by what name may I address him who does me the honor —"

"Call me monseigneur," rejoined Aramis, dryly.

Vanel bowed.

"Come, come, gentlemen," said Fouquet, "a truce to ceremony! Let us come to the point at once."

"As monseigneur perceives," said Vanel, "I await his pleasure."

"It is I, on the contrary, who am waiting," replied Fouquet.

"What is monseigneur waiting for?"

"I thought you had perhaps something to say to me."

"Oh! oh!" murmured Vanel to himself, "he has thought over the matter, and I am lost!" But, regaining his courage, he answered:

"No, monseigneur, absolutely nothing beyond what I said to you yesterday, and am ready to repeat."

"Come, speak frankly, M. Vanel. Is not this affair something of a burden upon you? Speak."

"Certainly, monseigneur, fourteen hundred thousand livres is a considerable sum."

"So considerable," said Fouquet, "that I have been reflecting —"

"You have been reflecting, monseigneur?" exclaimed Vanel, anxiously.

"Yes, that you may not be in a situation to purchase at once."

"Oh, monseigneur!"

"Reassure yourself, M. Vanel, I shall not blame you for a failure to keep your word, which is evidently due to inability on your part."

"On the contrary, monseigneur, you would blame me, and you would have great cause; for it would be the act of a rash fool to make engagements which he could not carry out, and I have always considered a thing agreed upon as a thing done."

Fouquet colored deeply. Aramis uttered an impatient "Hum!"

"You should not exaggerate such ideas, monsieur," said the superintendent, "for the human mind is variable, and liable to caprices which are very excusable, even commendable, at times; and many a man desires a thing to-day of which he may repent to-morrow."

Vanel felt a cold sweat pouring down his face. "Monseigneur!" he stammered.

As for Aramis, rejoiced to see the superintendent assume an attitude of such firmness in the debate, he leant easily upon

the mantelpiece, and began to play with a small silver and malachite paper-knife. Fouquet took his time. After a moment of silence he resumed :

"Listen, my dear M. Vanel," he said, "I am going to explain the situation to you." Vanel shuddered. "You are an honest man, and you will see it as I do." Vanel staggered. "Yesterday I wished to sell —"

"Monseigneur went further than wishing to sell. Monseigneur has sold."

"Well, so be it; but to-day I ask you, as a favor, to release me from the word which I pledged you."

"That word you pledged me," repeated Vanel, like an inflexible echo.

"I know it well. That is why I implore you, M. Vanel, — do you hear? I implore you to release me —"

Fouquet paused; those words, "*I implore you*," of which he did not perceive the immediate effect, seemed to tear his throat as he uttered them.

Aramis, still playing with the paper-knife, cast a look upon Vanel which seemed to pierce the very depths of his soul.

Vanel bowed. "Monseigneur," he said, "I am greatly moved by the honor you have done me in consulting me upon an accomplished fact, but —"

"Do not speak that *but*, dear M. Vanel."

"Alas, monseigneur, consider that I have brought the money with me — the entire sum," he said, as he opened a large pocket-book. "Here is the deed of sale of my wife's property. The order is authentic, with the required signatures affixed, and payable at sight; it is ready money. In fact, the affair is concluded."

"My dear M. Vanel, there is not an affair in this world, however important, which may not be set aside in order to oblige —"

"Certainly," Vanel stammered awkwardly.

"To oblige a man, of whom one would thus make a friend."

"Certainly, monseigneur —"

"And the more entirely a friend, M. Vanel, in proportion to the magnitude of the service. Come, M. Vanel, what do you decide?"

Vanel kept silence. Meanwhile Aramis had resumed his close scrutiny. Vanel's narrow visage, his deep-set eyes under their arched eyebrows, had revealed to the Bishop of Vannes

a marked type of avarice and ambition. To batter down one passion by means of another still stronger was Aramis' method. He saw that Fouquet was defeated, demoralized; he therefore threw himself into the conflict with fresh weapons.

"Pardon, monseigneur," he said, "you have forgotten to show M. Vanel that his interests are directly opposed to the renunciation of the sale."

Vanel gazed at the bishop in amazement; he had not looked for an auxiliary in that quarter.

Fouquet also paused to hear what the bishop had to say.

"You see," pursued Aramis, "M. Vanel, in order to purchase your office, has sold a property belonging to his wife. That is a serious matter; no one can displace fourteen or fifteen hundred thousand livres, as he has done, without considerable loss and embarrassment."

"That is quite true," rejoined Vanel, for Aramis with his clear-sighted gaze had torn his secret out of his very heart.

"Such embarrassments," pursued Aramis, "involve increased expenses, and when one has a large disbursement to make, such expenses become still more important."

"Yes, yes," said Fouquet, who began to penetrate Aramis' intentions.

Vanel remained silent; he too understood.

Aramis remarked his coldness and reserve. "Good, sour-face!" he said to himself. "You are playing at discretion until you know the amount, but never fear! I shall pour such a torrent of crowns upon you that you will be forced to capitulate."

"We must offer M. Vanel a hundred thousand crowns at once," said Fouquet, carried away by his generosity.

It was a dazzling amount. A prince might have been content with such a *largesse*. A hundred thousand crowns at that period was the dowry of a king's daughter.

Vanel did not budge.

"He is a rascal," thought the bishop; "he wants the five hundred thousand at once," and he made a sign to Fouquet.

"You seem to have expended a still greater sum than that, M. Vanel," said the superintendent; "the price of money is high, I know, and you must have made a great sacrifice in selling your land. What was I thinking of? It is a bond for five hundred thousand livres which I shall sign for you, and even then I shall feel greatly indebted to you."

Vanel showed no gleam of joy or cupidity; he remained impassive, and not a muscle of his face moved.

Aramis cast a glance of despair at Fouquet; then advancing towards Vanel he grasped him by the collar of his coat, with a gesture familiar to men of high consequence, while he said: "M. Vanel, it is not the embarrassed state of your finances, it is not the sale of your land, which is filling your mind at this moment; it is a thought of much more tremendous importance. I understand it at last, so hearken well to my words."

"Yes, monseigneur," and the wretched man began to tremble as the fire in the prelate's eyes seemed to scorch him.

"I offer you, therefore, I, in the name of the superintendent, not three hundred thousand livres, nor yet five hundred thousand, but a million — do you hear, a million?" and he shook him in his nervous grasp.

"A million!" stammered Vanel, turning pale.

"A million; that is to say, at the present rate of interest, an income of sixty-six thousand livres."

"Come, monsieur," said Fouquet, "that is not an offer to be refused. Speak, then. Do you accept?"

"Impossible," muttered Vanel.

Aramis compressed his lips, and something like a white cloud passed across his face. It was easy to divine the lightning behind this cloud; he did not loose his hold on Vanel.

"You have bought the office for fifteen hundred thousand livres, have you not? Very well, we will give you these fifteen hundred thousand. You will thus have gained a million and a half by paying a visit to M. Fouquet, and taking him by the hand. Honor and profit at once, M. Vanel!"

"I cannot do it," replied Vanel, hoarsely.

"Very well," said Aramis, who had so clutched Vanel by the doublet that at the moment he let go his hold the man staggered back against the wall. "It is clearly to be seen what you came to do here."

"Yes, it is clear," spoke Fouquet.

"But —" stammered Vanel, attempting to hold himself erect before the weakness of these two men of honor.

"The knave is presuming to speak," said Aramis in the tone of an emperor.

"Knave!" repeated Vanel.

"It was scoundrel I meant to say," added Aramis, recovering his self-possession.

"Come, produce your deed of sale, monsieur, you must have it there in your pocket, as an assassin carries his pistol or his poniard, hidden beneath his cloak."

Vanel muttered something.

"Enough!" cried Fouquet, "let us see this deed."

Vanel fumbled in his pockets with a shaking hand, and on drawing out his pocket-book a paper dropped from it while he was handing the deed to Fouquet. Aramis pounced upon the paper that had fallen, the handwriting of which he had recognized.

"Excuse me," said Vanel, "that is a rough draft of the deed."

"So I see," retorted Aramis with a smile more cruel than the lash of a whip, "and what amazes me is that this draft is in the handwriting of M. Colbert. Look, monseigneur."

He passed the paper to Fouquet, who at once recognized the truth of his statement. Covered with erasures, with words inserted in the margin, this deed — a startling proof of Colbert's plot — revealed it fully to the victim.

"Ah, well," murmured Fouquet.

Vanel, thoroughly cowed, seemed to be looking for a hole into which to crawl and hide his ignominy.

"Well," said Aramis, "if your name were not Fouquet, and if your enemy were not named Colbert, if you had only to face this cowardly thief here, I should say to you: 'Deny it all.' Such a proof of infamy nullifies every pledge; but these people would think it a sign of fear on your part and they would dread you less than they do. Here, monseigneur, sign," he said and held out a pen.

Fouquet pressed Aramis' hand, then, in place of the deed that was handed him, he took up the rough draft.

"No, not that," cried Aramis, hastily, "this is the one to sign. That document is too precious for you not to preserve it."

"No," replied Fouquet, "I shall sign upon M. Colbert's very paper and write on it: 'Writing approved.'"

He then signed, and said: "Here it is, M. Vanel." The latter seized the paper, laid down his money, and was about to escape.

"One moment!" cried Aramis, "are we sure that the exact amount is here? This must be counted, since it is the money M. Colbert gives to women. Ah! he is not so generous

as M. Fouquet, this excellent M. Colbert!" and Aramis spelled out every word, every letter of the bond, while he distilled his anger and contempt, drop by drop, upon the wretched man who had to endure this torture for some bitter moments. Then he was dismissed without a word, but with such a gesture as that with which a beggar is driven away or a lackey dismissed.

When Vanel was gone, the minister and the prelate, with their eyes fixed upon each other, kept silence for a moment.

"Well," said Aramis, breaking the silence first, "to what would you compare a man who, having to fight a furious enemy, clad in mail and armed to the teeth, strips himself, throws aside his weapons, and sends kisses to his adversary? Good faith, M. Fouquet, is an arm which scoundrels often use against men of honor, and to their advantage. Men of honor, on their part, should use bad faith in dealing with villains. You would then see how strong they would become, without ceasing to be honest."

"Their act would be called the act of a scoundrel," replied Fouquet.

"Not at all, it would be simply playing with the truth. But finally, since you have done with this Vanel, since you have renounced the pleasure of crushing him by withdrawing your word, since you have given into his hands the one weapon which can destroy us —"

"Ah, my friend," said Fouquet, sadly, "you are like the teacher of philosophy of whom La Fontaine told us the other day, who, seeing a child drowning, began to deliver him a lecture under three heads."

Aramis smiled: "A philosopher — yes; a teacher — yes; a drowning child — yes; but the child saved from drowning you are still to see. And now let us talk of business."

Fouquet gazed at him with amazement.

"Did you not confide in me, a short time ago, a certain project for a fête at Vaux?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Fouquet, "that was in my prosperous days!"

"A fête to which, I believe, the King had invited himself."

"No, my dear prelate; a fête to which M. Colbert had advised the King to invite himself."

"Ah, yes! as being so costly an entertainment that you could not avoid ruining yourself by it."

"Precisely so. In my prosperous days, as I was just saying,

I took pride in showing my wealth of resource to my enemies. I made it a point of honor to stagger them by creating millions where they saw only possible bankruptcy. But now I shall count closely with the state, with the King, with myself. I shall turn niggard and show the world that I can deal with *deniers* as I did with bags of pistoles. No later than to-morrow, after selling my equipages, mortgaging my houses, and reducing my expenses — ”

“No later than to-morrow,” quietly interrupted Aramis, “you are going to devote yourself unremittingly to preparations for that splendid *fête* at Vaux which shall be cited in future ages as among the heroic magnificences of your prosperous days.”

“You are mad, *chevalier*.”

“I, mad ! you do not really think so.”

“But do you not know that a *fête* at Vaux, even one of the simplest, can easily cost five or six millions?”

“I am not speaking of one of the simplest, my dear superintendent.”

“But since this *fête* is to be given in the King’s honor,” went on Fouquet, misunderstanding Aramis’ idea, “it cannot be a simple one.”

“Precisely, it must be of unparalleled magnificence !”

“In that case I should have to spend from ten to twelve millions.”

“You must spend twenty if necessary,” replied Aramis, quite unmoved.

“Where shall I find them ?” cried Fouquet.

“That concerns me, M. le Surintendant, and do not let it disturb you for an instant. The money shall be at your disposal before you have drawn up the plan of your *fête* !”

“*Chevalier ! Chevalier !*” cried Fouquet, feeling himself turning giddy, “where are you dragging me ?”

“Across the gulf into which you were about to fall,” replied the Bishop of Vannes. “Cling to my mantle and have no fear !”

“Why did you not say that to me before, Aramis ? There was a day when with one million you might have saved me !”

“While to-day — to-day I must give twenty,” said the prelate ; “so be it ! But the reason is a simple one, my friend ; on the day you speak of I had not a million at my disposal, while to-day I can easily obtain the twenty we require.”

"May Heaven hear you and save me!"

Aramis smiled mysteriously, as was his wont.

"Heaven always hears me," he said; "it may be because I pray so vociferously!"

"I give myself unreservedly into your hands," murmured Fouquet.

"Oh! I do not understand it in that way; it is I, rather, who am yours without reserve. It is you with your fine, ingenious fancy who must contrive the whole fête, even to its minutest details. Only —"

"Only?" questioned Fouquet, like a man accustomed to weighing the importance of parentheses.

"Well, only that while I leave the entire conception of the affair to you, I reserve to myself the charge of carrying it out."

"How so?"

"I mean that you must make me your major-domo for that day; your superintendent, a sort of factotum, combining in one person the steward and captain of the guards. I will set your people to work, and will keep the keys of the doors. You shall give the orders, but through me, — they will pass through my lips to reach those for whom they are intended. You understand?"

"No; I understand nothing."

"But you accept?"

"*Pardieu!* my friend. I do, indeed."

"That is all I require — thanks; then I leave you to make out your list of invitations."

"Whom shall I invite?"

"Every one."

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH IT SEEMS TO THE AUTHOR THAT IT IS FULLY TIME
TO GO BACK TO THE VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

OUR readers have seen the adventures of a new generation, and those of an earlier one, unrolling themselves, side by side, in this history. To the latter belong the reflection of past glory, the experience of the sorrowful things of life; to them also the peace which takes possession of the heart and scars over what were once cruel wounds. To the former belong the

combats of love and self-love, bitter griefs and ineffable joys, life instead of memory.

If any variety has been offered to the reader's eyes in the episodes of this narrative, it is due to the manifold tints that glow on this double palette where two pictures face each other, mingling and harmonizing their severe and joyous tones. Repose from the stormy emotions on one side is to be found amid more tranquil emotions on the other. After talking reason with the graybeards we love to join in the pleasing madness of the young. Thus, if the threads of our story do not connect this chapter very closely with the one we have just penned, we are no more troubled thereby than was Ruysdael when painting an autumn sky immediately after a spring landscape. We recommend our readers to do likewise, and to take up Raoul de Bragelonne with us at the exact point where our last sketch left him.

Wild, terrified, despairing, — and rather bereft of reason, plan, and will, — Raoul rushed forth after the scene in La Vallière's chamber. The King, Montalais, Louise, that chamber; his own strange expulsion from it; Louise's grief, Montalais' terror, the King's wrath — all presaged a great disaster — but what?

Having hastened over from London on the first intimation of danger, he found himself at once face to face with that danger. Was this not enough for a lover? Yes, doubtless, but it was not enough for a noble heart, proud to stake all upon its faith in a loyalty equal to its own.

Yet Raoul did not seek for explanations where a jealous or a less timid lover would have at once demanded them. He did not go straightway to his mistress and say to her: "Louise, do you no longer love me? Louise, do you love another?" A man full of courage, as ardent in friendship as in love, a scrupulous observer of his word, and believing in the word of others, Raoul said to himself: "Guiche wrote to warn me. He must know something. I shall go and ask Guiche what he knows, and tell him what I have seen."

The journey was not a long one. Guiche had been brought back to Paris two days before. He had begun to recover from his wound, and was able to take a few steps about his room. He gave a cry of joy on seeing Raoul enter with the eagerness of friendship. Raoul gave a cry of grief as he beheld Guiche so pale, thin, and sad.

A few words uttered by the wounded man, and a movement he made to ward off Raoul's arm, revealed to the latter the whole truth.

"Ah! it is the old story. We love, and therefore we die," cried Raoul, seating himself at his friend's side.

"No, no, we do not die," replied De Guiche, "since I am recovering, and since I hold you in my arms —"

"Oh, I know what I am saying —"

"And I understand you, too," replied De Guiche. "You think that I am unhappy, Raoul?"

"Alas!"

"No, I am the happiest of men! My body suffers indeed, but not my heart, nor my soul. If you only knew! — ah, I am the happiest of men!"

"So much the better!" answered Raoul, "if only it lasts."

"It is over. I have enough to last me till death, Raoul."

"You — I do not doubt it; but what of her?"

"Listen, my friend, I love her — because — but you are not listening."

"Forgive me."

"You are preoccupied?"

"I am indeed. Your health, in the first place."

"Ah, it is not that."

"My dear friend, you would do wrong to question me — you!" and he threw such emphasis on this "you" as to enlighten his friend completely in regard to his trouble and the difficulty of curing it.

"You say this to me, Raoul, because of what I wrote you."

"I do indeed — shall we talk that matter over a little, when you have finished telling me of your pleasures and pains?"

"My dear friend, at once! I am entirely at your disposal."

"Thanks! I am burning with impatience. I have hastened back from London, in half the space of time the King's couriers take for the journey. Tell me why you summoned me."

"I only wished to bring you back."

"Well, I am here."

"All is well, then."

"There is something more — I am sure of it."

"No, upon my honor!"

"Guiche!"

"On my honor!"

"You did not tear me suddenly away from all hopes of promotion, you did not expose me to being disgraced by the King for returning in defiance of orders, you cannot have planted this gnawing jealousy in my breast, simply to say to me: 'All is well, sleep peacefully!'"

"I do not say 'sleep peacefully,' Raoul, but understand me well — I can, I will tell you nothing more."

"Oh, my friend! if you know more, why do you hide it from me? If you know nothing, why did you warn me?"

"I did wrong! I deeply repent it. It is nothing to write to a friend: 'Come.' But to have that friend face to face, to see him shuddering and gasping in expectation of a word you dare not speak —"

"Dare, then! I have courage, if you have not!" cried Raoul in desperation.

"Now you are unjust, and you forget that you have a poor wounded fellow to deal with — one who is the other half of your heart besides. There, calm yourself! I said 'Come,' and you are here. Do not ask more of the unfortunate Guiche!"

"You told me to come, hoping that I should see with my own eyes, did you not?"

"But —"

"Do not hesitate! I have seen —"

"Ah!" exclaimed Guiche.

"Or at least, I thought I saw —"

"You see how it is, you are in doubt yourself. But if you have any doubt, my poor friend, what is there for me to do?"

"I saw La Vallière agitated — Montalais terrified — the King —"

"Well, the King?"

"Yes, you turn away your face — the danger is there, the evil is there; tell me, is it not the King?"

"I can tell you nothing."

"Oh, you tell me a thousand, thousand times more than if you spoke! Facts, in pity's name, give me facts! My friend, my only friend, speak! My heart is broken, crushed, — I am dying of despair!"

"If it be so, dear Raoul," replied Guiche, "you reassure me, and I can speak, feeling convinced that what I have to say will be consoling in comparison with the despair in which I see you."

"I am listening; speak."

"Well!" said the Comte de Guiche, "I can tell you what you might learn from the first comer."

"From the first comer? It is talked about?" cried Raoul.

"Before saying, 'It is talked about,' learn what there is of which the world can talk. I swear to you that it is of trifling things only, which may be perfectly innocent, — a walk, for instance —"

"Ah! a walk with the King?"

"Yes, with the King; and surely the King has often walked with ladies before, without on that account —"

"You would not have written to me if this walk had been of so little moment."

"It is true, no doubt, that in that thunder-storm it would have been far better if the King had sought shelter rather than remained standing with uncovered head before La Vallière; but —"

"But?"

"The King is so courteous!"

"Oh, Guiche! Guiche! you are killing me!"

"Let us say no more, then."

"Go on, go on! That walk was followed by others?"

"No — that is to say, yes; there was the adventure of the oak, to be sure. Do you mean that? I know nothing whatever about it."

Raoul rose. Guiche attempted to do the same, in spite of his weakness.

"Look you," he said, "I will add no word further. I have already said too much or too little. Others may give you all the information they can or choose; my duty was to warn you, and I have done so. Henceforth you must watch over your affairs yourself."

"And question others? Alas! you are no true friend to speak to me like this," said the unhappy youth. "The first man I question may be either a knave or a fool. If he is a knave, he will invent lies to torture me; if a fool, he will do still worse. Ah, Guiche! Guiche! Before two hours have passed I shall have heard a dozen falsehoods, and shall have as many duels on my hands. Save me! Is it not best to know one's whole misfortune?"

"But I tell you, I know nothing! I was wounded, and in a high fever. I had lost my head, and have only retained the

faintest impressions of what happened. But on my life, we are looking far afield when we have the very man you want under our hand. Is not D'Artagnan your friend?"

"Yes; that is true, that is true."

"Go, then, to him. He will throw light upon it all without trying to wound your eyes."

At that moment a lackey entered.

"What is it?" asked Guiche.

"Some one is waiting to see M. le Comte in the Porcelain cabinet."

"Very well. You will excuse me, dear Raoul? I am so proud to be able to walk again."

"I would offer you my arm, Guiche, if I did not divine that this some one is a lady."

"I believe it is," replied De Guiche, with a smile. And he took his leave of Raoul.

The latter remained motionless, absorbed, crushed, like the unfortunate miner upon whom the pit has caved in, and who, sorely wounded, with his blood flowing, his brain confused, still tries to collect himself, and use his reason to save his life. A few minutes sufficed with Raoul to dispel the bewilderment caused by these new revelations. He had already recovered the thread of his ideas, when suddenly he thought he recognised through the door the voice of Montalais in the Porcelain cabinet.

"It is she!" he cried. "I am sure of her voice. Oh! there is a woman who will tell me the truth; but shall I attempt to question her here? She conceals herself evidently, even from me; she has doubtless been sent by Madame. I will see her in her own apartment; she will explain all to me — her terror, her flight, the strange way in which I was excluded; she will tell me all — after M. d'Artagnan, who knows everything, has fortified my courage. Madame there is a coquette, but a coquette, after all, who can love in her better moments, a coquette who has her caprices, — as life and death have theirs, — but who gives Guiche cause to call himself the happiest of men. There is one, at least, who lies upon roses. Well, I must be gone!" and he hastily left the count's apartment, reproaching himself as he went for having spoken to Guiche only of his own affairs; and thus he arrived at D'Artagnan's quarters.

CHAPTER XI.

BRAGELONNE CONTINUES HIS INQUIRIES.

THE captain was on duty ; that is to say, he was buried in his great leather armchair, with his spurs dug deep into the floor, his sword between his knees, reading a great pile of letters and twisting his mustache.

D'Artagnan gave a growl of satisfaction on perceiving his friend's son :

"Raoul, my lad," he cried, "how does it chance that the King has recalled you?"

These words jarred upon the ear of the young man, who replied, as he seated himself :

"Upon my word, I know nothing about it. All I know is that I have come back."

"Hum!" growled D'Artagnan, as he folded his letters and darted a meaning glance at his companion.

"What are you saying there, my son? The King has not recalled you and yet here you are back again. I do not understand that."

Raoul, who was already pale, sat twirling his hat with an air of constraint.

"What a devil of a look you have and what a funereal attitude!" exclaimed the captain. "Is it in England that you have learnt these manners? *Mordieux!* I have been in England too, and I came back as gay as a lark. Can't you speak?"

"I have too much to say."

"Ah, indeed! How is your father?"

"Excuse me, dear friend, I was about to ask you."

D'Artagnan redoubled the sharpness of his gaze, which no secret could long resist.

"You are in trouble," he said.

"*Pardieu!* You know that well enough, M. d'Artagnan."

"What, I?"

"Yes, you, indeed! Oh! you need not put on that air of amazement."

"I am not putting on an air of amazement, my friend."

"Dear captain, I am well aware that in trials of *finesse*, as in trials of strength, you can easily beat me, and at this moment, as you see, I am a fool—a worm. I have neither

brains nor arms left; do not mock me, therefore, but help me! I am the most wretched of beings."

"Oh, oh! and why is that?" asked D'Artagnan, loosening his sword-belt and softening his rugged smile.

"Because Mademoiselle de la Vallière is false to me."

D'Artagnan's expression did not change.

"She is false to you, false! These are big words! Who has been using them?"

"Every one."

"Ah! if every one says so, there must be a grain of truth in it. I am not one of those who believe there can be smoke without fire. It is ridiculous, but so it is."

"You believe it, then?" cried Raoul, hastily.

"So you wish me to take sides—"

"Without doubt."

"But I do not meddle in such affairs; you know that very well."

"What! not for a friend—a son?"

"For that very reason, no! If you were a stranger I should say—I should say nothing at all. How is Porthos at present, do you know?"

"Monsieur," cried Raoul, pressing D'Artagnan's hand, "in the name of the friendship you have sworn to my father!"

"Oh, the devil. You are sick indeed—of curiosity."

"It is not curiosity; it is love."

"Good! another big word. If you were really in love, my dear Raoul, it would be quite another affair."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I tell you that if you were so deeply in love that I could believe I was speaking straight to your heart—but it is impossible!"

"I tell you that I love Louise to distraction."

D'Artagnan's eyes read the very depths of Raoul's heart.

"It is impossible, I say. You are like all young men. You are not in love. You are mad."

"Well, even if it were only that?"

"No wise man ever succeeded in directing a brain that is whirling—no, not by a single hair's-breadth. I have lost my pains over the attempt a hundred times in my life. Even if you should listen to me you would not hear me, if you heard me you would not understand me, and if you understood you would not heed me."

"Oh, try me, try me!"

"I will say more: if I were so unfortunate as to know something of this matter, and so foolish as to tell you what I know — you are my friend, you say?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, it would merely set us by the ears. You would never forgive me for destroying your illusions, as people express it who are in love."

"M. d'Artagnan, you know all; and yet you leave me to bewilderment, to despair, to death! It is frightful!"

"*La, la.*"

"I never make an outcry, as you know. But since neither God nor my father would ever forgive me for blowing out my brains with a pistol-shot, I shall go from here to the first comer who will tell me what you refuse to tell. I shall give him the lie —"

"And you will kill him? A fine affair! Well, so much the better. What does it matter to me? Kill, my boy, kill, if that will give you any pleasure. You are just like those people who come to me with the toothache, and cry: 'Oh, how I suffer! I could bite iron!' 'Well, bite, friend, bite,' I say; 'the tooth will be there all the same.'"

"I shall not kill, monsieur," replied Raoul, gloomily.

"Yes, oh, yes! You put on these airs, you young fellows of the day. You will get yourself killed, will you not? Ah, how fine that would be! and how deeply I should regret you! How I should go about saying all day: 'He was a precious simpleton, that Bragelonne, an ungrateful dog! I had spent my life teaching him to hold a sword properly, and the idiot has let himself be trussed like a fowl!' Go, Raoul, go, and get yourself killed, my fine friend. I don't know who taught you logic, but 'damn me,' as the English say, whoever he was, monsieur, he stole your father's money."

Raoul buried his face in his hands, muttering, "I have no friends, no, not one!"

"Bah!" said D'Artagnan.

"All are indifferent to me or mock me!"

"Idle talk! I am no mocker, Gascon though I be. As for being indifferent, if I were so I should have sent you to all the devils a good half hour ago; for you would make a man sad who was mad with joy, and kill a sad one. What, young man! you wish me to put you out of conceit with the

woman you love, and teach you to execrate all womankind, who are the delight and honor of human life?"

"Monsieur, speak, speak, and I will bless you!"

"But, my dear fellow, do you imagine that I have stuffed my brain with all that talk about a carpenter and a painter, about the staircase and the portrait, and a hundred more idle tales?"

"A carpenter! what do you mean by this carpenter?"

"Faith! what do I know? I was told some tale about a carpenter who made an opening through a floor."

"In La Vallière's apartment?"

"Oh, I do not know where!"

"Or in the King's?"

"Good! If it were in the King's apartment I should be likely to tell you of it, should I not?"

"Where, then?"

"For an hour I have been dinning it into your ears that I do not know."

"But the painter, then, — the portrait?"

"It seems that the King had a portrait painted of one of the court ladies."

"Of La Vallière?"

"Ah! you have nothing but that name on your lips! Who is talking of La Vallière?"

"But if it be not she, how does it concern me?"

"I have not said that it concerns you. You question me and I answer you. You wish to hear the court scandals, so I am repeating them to you. Make what you can of them!"

Raoul struck his forehead in despair. "It will kill me," he cried.

"So you have said already."

"Yes, you are right," and he took a step or two, as if going away.

"Where are you going?" said D'Artagnan.

"I am going in search of some one who will tell me the truth."

"Who is that?"

"A woman."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière herself, you mean, doubtless," said D'Artagnan with a smile. "That is a famous idea you have; you wished to be consoled and you will be so at once. She will tell you no evil of herself, that is certain!"

"You are mistaken, monsieur, the woman to whom I am going will tell me much evil."

"Montalais, I wager!"

"Yes, Montalais."

"Ah, her friend? A woman who in that capacity will be sure to exaggerate the good or the evil — my good Raoul, do not go to her."

"That is not the true reason why you wish me not to see Montalais."

"Very well, then, I admit it — and in fact, why should I go on playing with you like a cat with a poor little mouse? I pity you — I do indeed! and if I wish you not to speak to Montalais, it is because you will be sure to betray your secret to her, and she will take advantage of it. Wait awhile, if you can."

"I cannot wait."

"So much the worse! Look here, Raoul, if I should chance to have an idea — but I have none."

"Promise me, my friend, to pity me, that is all I ask! and suffer me to get out of this as best I can alone."

"Oh, yes, of course, and get yourself deeper into the mire! Sit down here at this table at once and take your pen."

"For what purpose?"

"To write to Montalais and ask for a rendezvous."

"Ah!" cried Raoul, seizing the paper held out to him by the captain.

Suddenly the door opened, and a musketeer approaching D'Artagnan said:

"Captain, Mademoiselle de Montalais is here and wishes to speak to you."

"To me?" muttered D'Artagnan, "ask her to come in, and I shall see whether it is to me she wishes to speak."

The wily captain had guessed rightly. Montalais on entering perceived Raoul at once and cried:

"Monsieur! Monsieur! — Excuse me, M. d'Artagnan."

"Oh, I will excuse you, mademoiselle," said D'Artagnan; "I am well aware that at my time of life whoever seeks me out must have great need of me."

"I was seeking M. de Bragelonne," replied Montalais.

"What a lucky coincidence! He was also seeking you. Raoul, do you not wish to go with mademoiselle?"

"With all my heart."

"Go, then!" and he pushed Raoul gently out of the cabinet; then taking Montalais' hand in his:

"Be kind to him," he said in a low voice; "spare him and spare her."

"Ah!" she replied in the same tone. "It is not I who will speak to him."

"Who is it, then?"

"It is Madame who has sent me for him."

"Ah, good!" cried D'Artagnan. "It is Madame, is it? Before an hour is over the poor boy will be cured!"

"Or dead!" added Montalais, compassionately.

"Farewell, M. d'Artagnan!"

And she hastened to rejoin Raoul, who was waiting for her outside the door, greatly perplexed and disturbed by this dialogue, which boded no good to him.

CHAPTER XII.

TWO JEALOUSIES.

LOVERS are tender towards all who approach their beloved one. Raoul no sooner found himself alone with Montalais than he kissed her hand with fervor.

"There, that will do, dear M. Raoul," the young girl said sadly. "You are only throwing your kisses away, and I warrant you that they will bring you back no interest."

"How do you mean that? What is it? Will you explain yourself, my dear Aure?"

"Madame will explain everything. It is to her that I am taking you."

"What —"

"Silence, and no more of those wild, startled glances. The very windows have eyes, and the walls sharp ears. Do me the favor not to look at me; be so kind as to talk to me of the rain and the fine weather, and the delights of England."

"But at least —"

"Ah, I warn you that somewhere — I have no idea where — Madame has her eye upon us and her ears wide open. I do not care, you understand, to be dismissed, or sent to the Bastille. Let us talk, as I said, or rather let us not talk."

Raoul clinched his fists, quickened his steps, and assumed the bearing of a man of courage, it is true, but of a man of courage on his way to the scaffold. Montalais, with a quick-glancing eye and nimble step, preceded him, her head in the air. Raoul was introduced at once into Madame's apartment.

"Come, now," he said to himself; "this day will go by without my knowing anything. De Guiche pitied me too much. He and Madame have had an understanding, and both together, by a friendly plot, are postponing the solution of the problem. Oh, if I only had some good enemy!—that serpent of a De Wardes, for example. He would bite, it is true; but I should no longer hesitate. To hesitate,—to doubt longer,—it were better to die!"

Raoul stood in Madame's presence. Henrietta, more charming than ever, was half reclining in an easy-chair, her tiny feet on a footstool of embroidered velvet. She was playing with a silky, long-haired kitten, which was biting her fingers and hanging from her lace collar. Madame was dreaming; she was dreaming so profoundly that it required both Montalais' voice and Raoul's to rouse her from her reverie.

"Your Highness sent for me," repeated Raoul. Madame shook her head as if awakening from sleep.

"Good-day, M. de Bragelonne," she said. "Yes, I sent for you. You are just returned from England, are you not?"

"At your royal Highness's service."

"Thanks! You can leave us, Montalais;" and the latter left the room.

"You have a few moments to give me, have you not, M. de Bragelonne?"

"My whole life belongs to your royal Highness," replied Raoul deferentially, divining some mystery beneath Madame's courtesy, and not altogether displeased by that courtesy, persuaded as he was of a certain affinity between Madame's sentiments and his own. In fact, the strange character of this princess, with its blending of wilful caprice and fantastic despotism, was well known to all the more intelligent of the courtiers. Madame had been flattered beyond measure by the King's homage; Madame had made herself talked about, and had aroused in the Queen that mortal jealousy which is the gnawing worm at the heart of all feminine happiness; Madame, in a word, in attempting to heal her wounded pride, had found her own heart engaged. We know what steps she

had taken to recall Raoul when sent to a safe distance by Louis XIV. Raoul knew nothing of her letter to Charles II., but D'Artagnan had easily guessed it.

Who can explain this strange mingling of love and vanity, this unrivalled tenderness, these enormous perfidies? No one; not even the bad angel who kindles coquetry in the female heart.

"M. de Bragelonne," said the princess, after a short silence, "have you returned satisfied?"

Bragelonne looked at Madame Henrietta, and seeing her pale with the consciousness of what she was hiding, of what she was holding back, of what she was burning to reveal:

"Satisfied?" he said. "With what do you expect me to be either satisfied or dissatisfied, Madame?"

"Well, what should render a man of your age and appearance satisfied or dissatisfied?"

"How fast she goes!" thought Raoul in dismay. "What does she wish to whisper to my heart?"

Then terrified at what he was about to hear, and wishing to postpone the longed-for but dreaded moment when he should learn all:

"Madame," he said, "I left a devoted friend in perfect health, and I come back to find him grievously ill."

"Are you speaking of M. de Guiche?" asked Madame Henrietta, with imperturbable serenity; "he is a very dear friend of yours, they say."

"Yes, Madame."

"Oh, well! it is true he has been wounded, but he is better. M. de Guiche is not an object of pity," she added hastily. Then, correcting herself, she added: "Is he to be pitied? has he complained to you? has he some trouble of which we are not aware?"

"I was speaking only of his wound, Madame."

"So much the better! for in other respects M. de Guiche seems to be very happy; he is usually in a joyous mood. Come, M. de Bragelonne, I am sure that you would choose to be wounded like him in your body only! What is a bodily wound, after all?"

Raoul shivered. "She still reverts to it," he said to himself, "alas!" and he gave no answer.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"I said nothing, Madame," he replied.

"You said nothing? You disagree with me, then? You *are* satisfied as it is?"

Raoul drew near her. "Madame," he said, "your royal Highness has something to communicate to me, and your natural generosity leads you to spare me. I implore your Highness to spare me nothing! I am strong, I can bear it."

"Ah!" rejoined Henrietta, "what do you understand, now?"

"What your Highness wishes me to understand," and Raoul trembled, in spite of himself, as he pronounced these words.

"It was, in truth, cruel," murmured the princess, "but since I have begun —"

"Yes, Madame, since your Highness has deigned to begin, will you not deign to finish?"

Henrietta rose precipitately, and took a few steps up and down the chamber.

"What did M. de Guiche tell you?" she suddenly asked.

"Nothing, Madame."

"Nothing? he told you nothing? Oh, I recognize him in that!"

"He wished to spare me, doubtless."

"And that is what friends call friendship! But M. d'Artaignan, from whom you have just parted, — he has surely told you —"

"No more than M. de Guiche, Madame."

Henrietta made a gesture of impatience.

"At least," she said, "you know what the whole court has been saying?"

"I know nothing whatever, Madame."

"Not the scene of the thunderstorm?"

"Not the scene of the thunderstorm!"

"Nor the *tête-à-tête* in the forest?"

"Nor the *tête-à-tête* in the forest!"

"Nor the flight to Chaillot?"

Raoul, who had bowed his head like the flower mown down by the scythe, made a superhuman effort to smile, as he answered with exquisite gentleness:

"I have had the honor of telling your royal Highness that I know absolutely nothing; I am a poor forgotten exile, but this moment returned from England; between myself and those I left here there has been such a roar of waves that these rumors, of which your royal Highness speaks, could not reach my ears."

Henrietta was touched by his pallor, by his gentleness, and his courage; but the ruling sentiment in her heart at this moment was an intense desire to know what feelings the poor lover cherished towards her who had made him suffer so cruelly.

"M. de Bragelonne," she said, "what none of your friends were willing to do, I will do for you, because I like and esteem you. I will be your friend. You carry your head among them all here like a man of honor; I do not choose that you should bow it beneath a storm of ridicule — in a week from now, perhaps, beneath a tempest of scorn!"

"Ah!" cried Raoul, turning livid, "has it come to that?"

"If you do not know all," said the princess, "I see that you divine it. You were betrothed to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, were you not?"

"I was, Madame."

"By that right, then, I owe you a warning, since one day I may dismiss Mademoiselle de la Vallière from my service —"

"Dismiss La Vallière!" cried Raoul.

"Without doubt. Do you think I can go on considering the King's tears and lamentations? No, no, my house shall no longer be used for such doings. But you are trembling!"

"No, Madame, pardon me," said Bragelonne, with an effort, "I thought for a moment I was going to die, that is all. Your royal Highness was doing me the honor to tell me that the King has wept, implored."

"Yes, but in vain."

And she proceeded to relate to Raoul the scene at Chaillot and the King's despair on his return; she related her own indulgence and the terrible speech by which she — the outraged princess, the humbled coquette — had quelled the royal anger.

Raoul bent his head.

"What do you think of it all?" she said.

"The King loves her," he replied.

"But you seem to imply that she does not love him."

"Alas, Madame, I am still thinking of the time when she loved me."

Henrietta had a moment of admiration for this sublime incredulity; then shrugging her shoulders:

"You do not believe me?" she said. "Oh, how you love her, you; and you doubt her love for the King?"

"Until I have proof. Pardon me, but I have her word, you see, and she is the daughter of nobles."

"A proof? Well, so be it! Come with me."

CHAPTER XIII.

A DOMICILIARY VISIT.

THE princess, preceding Raoul, led him across the court-yard towards that part of the building in which La Vallière lived, and ascending the same staircase which Raoul had gone up that very morning, she stopped at the door of the chamber where the young man had been so strangely received by Montalais. The moment was well chosen for carrying out the project conceived by Madame Henrietta; the château was deserted, the King, the courtiers, and the ladies of the court having gone to Saint-Germain. Madame Henrietta alone, knowing that Bragelonne had returned and thinking how she might turn his arrival to account, had pleaded indisposition and remained behind.

Madame was sure, therefore, of finding La Vallière's apartment and that of Saint-Aignan vacant. She took a double key from her pocket and opened the door of the maid of honor's apartment. Bragelonne's gaze plunged into the chamber, which he recognized, and the impression which the sight made upon him was one of his first torments. The princess glanced at him and her experienced eye could detect all that was going on in the young man's heart.

"You asked me for proofs," she said; "do not be surprised, therefore, if I give them to you. Now, if you do not feel within yourself the courage to endure them, there is still time, we will turn back."

"Thanks, Madame; but I have come in order to be convinced. You promised to convince me; do so."

"Come in, then," said Madame, "and close the door behind you."

Bragelonne obeyed, and then turned towards the princess a questioning look.

"You know where you are?" asked Madame Henrietta.

"Everything leads me to believe, Madame, that I am in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's chamber."

"You are there, indeed."

"But I beg to remind your Highness that this chamber is merely a chamber, and proves nothing —"

"Wait," and so saying the princess walked towards the foot of the bed, folded back the screen, and, stooping to the floor, said:

"Look here! Stoop down, and raise this trap-door yourself."

"A trap-door!" exclaimed Raoul in amazement; for D'Aragnan's vague hints returned to his mind, and he remembered his having used that word. He began to search vainly for any crack which might indicate an opening, or for a ring which would help in raising any part of the floor.

"Ah, that is true!" said Madame Henrietta, laughing. "I forgot the secret spring. The fourth plank of the floor, press upon the spot where there is a knot-hole in the wood. Those are the directions. Press it yourself, vicomte, press. Here it is!"

Raoul, pale as death, pressed his thumb on the spot indicated, and instantly the spring worked, and the trap-door rose of its own accord.

"It is very ingenious," remarked the princess. "We can perceive that the architect foresaw how small a hand would use this spring. See how the trap opens of itself!"

"A staircase!" cried Raoul.

"Yes, and a very elegant one," said Henrietta. "You see, vicomte, that it has a balustrade to save from a fall delicate persons who might venture to descend it; therefore I will risk it. Come, vicomte, follow me, follow me!"

"But before I follow you, Madame, tell me where this staircase leads."

"Ah, it is true I forgot to tell you."

"I am listening, Madame," said Raoul, breathing heavily.

"You know, perhaps, that M. de Saint-Aignan formerly had an apartment side by side with the King's."

"Yes, Madame, I know that it was so before I went away, for I had the honor several times of visiting him in his old lodging!"

"Well, he obtained permission from the King to exchange that handsome, convenient apartment for the two small rooms to which this staircase leads, and which constitute a lodging twice as small and ten times as remote from that of the King; and yet proximity to his Majesty is not usually disdained by gentlemen of the court."

"Very good, Madame," rejoined Raoul, "but go on, I pray you. I do not yet understand."

"Well, it happened quite by chance that M. de Saint-Aignan's lodging is situated below that of my maids of honor, and directly under that of La Vallière."

"But what is the object of this trap-door and this staircase?"

"Upon my word, I do not know. But shall we descend to M. de Saint-Aignan's apartment? Perhaps we shall there find the key to the enigma."

Madame set the example by going down the stairway herself, while Raoul, sighing deeply, followed her. Each step that creaked beneath Bragelonne's footsteps brought him further into this mysterious apartment which seemed to be still pervaded with La Vallière's sighs and the suave perfume of her presence. Bragelonne realized with every panting breath he drew that the young girl had passed that way; and with these subtle emanations came the evidence afforded by the perfume of flowers she loved, and the sight of the books she had chosen. If Raoul had still retained a doubt, it would have vanished before this secret harmony of tastes and mind with the objects that surround the daily life. For Raoul, La Vallière was actually present in the furnishing of the chamber, in the color of the hangings, and even in the glitter of the polished floor. Mute and crushed, he had nothing further to learn and merely followed his remorseless guide as the victim follows his executioner.

Madame, with the cruelty innate in a nervous, delicate woman, spared him not a single detail. But it must be said that in spite of the sort of apathy into which he had fallen, not one of these details would have escaped Raoul, even had he been alone. The happiness of the woman he loves is torture to a jealous lover when that happiness comes from a rival. But for jealousy such as Raoul's, for a heart steeped for the first time in such bitterness, Louise's happiness was a shameful death—death of body and soul alike. He divined all—the hands clasped in each other, the faces pressed close together before these mirrors in vows made doubly sweet as the dear image thus reflected is stamped the more deeply on the memory. He divined the kisses exchanged behind these heavy hangings, and he turned in feverish pain from the mute eloquence of the couches standing in

their shadow. This luxury, this studied elegance which spoke of rapturous care to spare the beloved one every unpleasing sight, and prepare a succession of gracious surprises for her; this power of love, multiplied by the power of royalty, dealt Raoul a deadly blow. If there can be any mitigation of the pangs of jealousy, it is in a sense of inferiority on the part of the rival; but what gives this passion an infernal power, a torture without a name, is to feel this rival to be a demigod — a being who combines sovereign power with youth, grace, and beauty. At such moments Heaven itself seems to have taken part against the discarded lover.

One last torment was reserved for poor Raoul when Madame Henrietta raised a silken curtain and he beheld behind it La Vallière's portrait; and not her portrait only, but La Vallière young, joyous, beautiful, drinking in life at every breath, — for at eighteen life is love.

"Louise!" murmured Raoul, "Louise! It is true, then? Ah, you never loved me, for you never looked at me with a glance like that!"

And it seemed to him that his heart was being wrung within his breast.

Madame Henrietta gazed at him, half envying such grief, though she well knew that she had nothing to envy, since Guiche loved her as Bragelonne loved La Vallière.

Raoul surprised this look of Madame Henrietta. "Oh, pardon me, pardon me!" he exclaimed; "I ought, I know, to be more master of myself in your presence, Madame, but may the Lord of heaven and earth grant you never to be struck by such a blow as that which crushes me at this moment! for you are a woman and doubtless you could not endure such grief. Pardon me, I am only a poor gentleman, while you are of the race of the elect, the happy, the all-powerful."

"M. de Bragelonne," replied Henrietta, "a heart such as yours deserves every respect and consideration from the heart of a queen. I am your friend, monsieur, therefore I did not choose that your whole life should be poisoned by treachery and soiled by ridicule. It was I who, more courageous than all your so-called friends, — with the exception of M. de Guiche, — summoned you back from London; it is I who have furnished you with these painful but necessary proofs which will work your cure, if you are a valiant lover and not a whimpering Amadis. Do not thank me; pity me rather, and do not serve the King less faithfully."

Raoul smiled bitterly. "Ah, I had forgotten that; the King is my master!"

"Your liberty is at stake! your very life!"

A clear and penetrating look from Raoul's eyes showed Madame Henrietta that she had been mistaken and that he was not one to be moved by her last argument.

"Take care, M. de Bragelonne," she said, "weigh your actions carefully or you will rouse the wrath of a prince too prone to be carried beyond the bounds of reason; you will bring grief upon your friends and family. Submit, resign yourself, consent to be cured."

"Thanks, Madame," he said, "I appreciate the advice your Highness has given me and I shall endeavor to follow it; but one last word, I beg of you."

"Speak."

"Would it be an indiscretion to ask you how you discovered the secret of this trap-door, of this portrait?"

"Oh, nothing could be simpler; for purposes of surveillance over my maids of honor, I have duplicate keys to their apartments; it appeared to me strange that La Vallière should shut herself in so often; it seemed to me strange that M. de Saint-Aignan should change his lodging; it seemed to me still stranger that the King should visit M. de Saint-Aignan daily, however close his friendship for him; and finally it seemed very strange that so many things should happen during your absence, that the very customs of the court should be changed. I do not wish to be tricked by the King, nor to serve as a cloak to his *amours*; for after La Vallière who weeps, he will have Montalais who laughs, and Tonnay-Charente who sings. It places me in a position most unworthy of me. I therefore set aside all scruples of friendship, I discovered the secret. I am wounding your feelings; once more forgive me, but I had a duty to fulfil. It is over, you are now warned; the storm will soon burst, and you must protect yourself."

"You anticipate some result, however, Madame," replied Bragelonne, firmly; "you do not imagine that I shall accept without protest the shame and treachery to which I have been subjected?"

"You will take what measures you please on that subject, M. Raoul, only do not reveal the source from which you have learned the truth. That is all I ask, that is the only return I claim for the service I have done you."

"Have no fear, Madame," replied Bragelonne, with a bitter smile.

"I bought over the locksmith whom the lovers had bribed ; you might easily have done the same, might you not ?"

"Yes, Madame. Your royal Highness has no advice to give and no condition to impose except that you should not be compromised ?"

"No other."

"I will then beg your Highness to permit me to remain here one moment longer."

"Without me ?"

"Oh, no, Madame. It matters not ; what I have to do can be done before you. I ask only for a moment to write a line to some one."

"That is dangerous, M. de Bragelonne. Take care !"

"No one can know that it was your royal Highness who did me the honor to bring me here. Besides, I shall sign the letter I am about to write."

"Do it then, monsieur."

Raoul had drawn out his tablets and now wrote rapidly the following words :

"MONSIEUR LE COMTE: Do not be surprised at finding here this paper signed by me. I shall shortly send one of my friends to you, who will have the honor of explaining the object of my visit."

"VICOMTE RAOUL DE BRAGELONNE."

He folded the sheet and slipping it into the lock of the door which communicated with the chamber of the lovers, and assuring himself that the paper was so plainly visible that Saint-Aignan could not fail to see it on entering, Raoul rejoined the princess, who was already at the head of the stairs.

On the landing they separated — Raoul with protestations of gratitude to her Highness, Henrietta full of commiseration, or pretended commiseration, for the unhappy man whom she had condemned to such atrocious torture.

"Alas !" she exclaimed, as she watched him depart, pale as death, and with blood-shot eyes ; "if I had but known, I would have hidden the truth from that hapless young man !"

CHAPTER XIV.

PORTHOS' METHOD.

THE multiplicity of characters whom we are obliged to introduce into this lengthy narrative obliges each one to appear in his proper turn and only as the exigencies of the story require. Accordingly our readers have had no opportunity of meeting our friend Porthos since his return from Fontainebleau.

The honors which he had received from the King had in no wise altered the mild and affectionate nature of this worthy gentleman; only he carried his head a trifle higher than was his wont, and bore himself with an air of majesty since he had been honored by an invitation to dine at the King's table. His Majesty's dining-hall had produced a certain effect upon Porthos. The lord of Bracieux and Pierrefonds was fond of recalling what a swarm of servants and what an array of court officials had stood behind the guests' chairs, imparting by their presence a distinguished air to the banquet, and seeming in a fashion to furnish the hall.

Porthos promised himself that he would at once confer some sort of rank upon M. Mouston, establish a hierarchy among his remaining attendants, thus creating for himself a military household, such as was not without precedent with great captains, since in the preceding generation this state had been maintained by Messieurs de Tréville, de Schomberg, and de la Vieuville, without mentioning Messieurs de Richelieu, de Condé, and de Bouillon-Turenne.

Wherefore, then, should not he, Porthos, the friend of the King and of M. Fouquet, baron, engineer, etc., enjoy all the pleasures belonging to great possessions and great merit?

A little neglected by Aramis, who, as we know, was greatly taken up by M. Fouquet; somewhat forsaken by D'Artagnan, on account of the latter's military service; weary of Trüchen and Planchet, Porthos surprised himself by dreaming he hardly knew of what. But if any one had asked him: "Is there anything lacking to you, Porthos?" he would assuredly have answered "Yes."

After one of those dinners, during which he had striven to recall all the details of the royal dinner, Porthos, half-joyous,

thanks to the good wine he had been drinking, half-sad, thanks to his schemes of ambition, was beginning to abandon himself to a siesta when his valet-de-chambre came to announce that M. de Bragelonne wished to speak with him.

Porthos passed into an adjoining room, where he found his young friend in the state of mind we already know. Raoul advanced and shook Porthos by the hand, while the latter, surprised by the gravity of his aspect, offered him a chair.

"Dear M. du Vallon," said Raoul, "I have come to ask you a favor."

"That happens most fortunately, my young friend," replied Porthos. "I have had eight thousand livres sent me this morning from Pierrefonds, so if it is money you need —"

"No, it is not money, but I thank you, kindest of friends."

"So much the worse! I have always heard it said that this is the rarest of favors, but the easiest to grant. That remark struck me; I like to quote remarks that strike me."

"Your heart is as good as your mind is sound."

"You are too kind. You will dine with me, I hope?"

"Oh, no, I have no appetite."

"Eh! What a frightful country England is!"

"Oh, not altogether! but —"

"You know, if it were not for finding excellent fish and very good meat there it would not be endurable."

"Yes — I have come —"

"I am listening. Only permit me to quench my thirst. One eats such salt fare in Paris. Faugh!" and Porthos ordered in a bottle of champagne; then having filled Raoul's glass, he took a deep draught himself, and resumed with much satisfaction:

"I needed that draught in order to listen to you without being distracted. Now I am quite at your service. What do you wish to ask me, dear Raoul? What is it you want?"

"Give me your opinion upon quarrels, my dear friend."

"My opinion? Why, let me see! Could you not develop your idea a little?" replied Porthos, scratching his head.

"I mean to say, are you apt to be good-tempered when there is a falling out between friends of yours and strangers?"

"Oh, extremely good-tempered — as usual."

"Very well! but what do you do under those circumstances?"

"When my friends get into any quarrel, I have one principle —"

"What is it?"

"It is that time lost is irreparable, and that it is never so easy to arrange an affair as while one is still heated by discussion."

"Ah, really! that is your principle?"

"Absolutely. Therefore, as soon as a quarrel takes place, I bring the parties face to face."

"Hey-day!"

"You understand that in that way it is impossible for a quarrel not to be made up."

"I should have thought," said Raoul, with amazement, "that taken in that way a quarrel would, on the contrary —"

"Not the least in the world. Just think now! I have had in my life something like a hundred and eighty to a hundred and ninety regular duels, without counting sword contests and chance encounters."

"That is a fine number," said Raoul, smiling in spite of himself.

"Oh! that is nothing; I am so gentle! D'Artagnan reckons his duels by hundreds. It is true that he is harsh and provoking; I have often told him so."

"Thus," said Raoul, "you usually make up the quarrels which your friends confide to you."

"There is not a single instance of my not making one up sooner or later," said Porthos, with a mildness and confidence which made Raoul start.

"But," he said, "are these settlements always honorable?"

"Oh! I can answer for that; and *à propos*, I must explain my other principle to you. When once a friend has entrusted his quarrel to me, this is how I proceed: I seek out his adversary at once, armed with all the civility and self-possession which are requisite on such occasions."

"It is owing to this politeness," said Raoul, with some bitterness, "that you settle these affairs so safely and surely."

"I believe so. I go then to the adversary and say to him: 'Monsieur, it is impossible that you should not be aware to what an extent you have outraged my friend.'"

At this Raoul frowned.

"Sometimes — often, indeed," pursued Porthos, "my friend has not been offended at all; he has, in fact, been the ag-

gressor. You may judge, therefore, how adroit this speech is." And Porthos burst out laughing.

"Decidedly," said Raoul to himself, while this formidable thunder of hilarity was sounding in his ears, "I am out of luck. Guiche treats me coldly, D'Artagnan mocks me, and Porthos is tame-spirited. No one will *settle* this quarrel after my fashion. And I was so sure in coming to Porthos that I should find a sword in place of arguments! Ah! what bitter luck!"

Porthos, having recovered himself, went on: "In this way, by a single word, I have put the adversary in the wrong."

"That is as it may be," said Raoul, absently.

"Not at all, it is a sure thing. I have put him in the wrong; it is at this moment that I display all my courtesy in order to bring matters to a happy issue. I advance, therefore, in an affable manner, and taking the adversary by the hand —"

"Oh!" cried Raoul, impatiently.

"'Monsieur,' I say to him, 'now that you are convicted of having given the offence we are assured of reparation. Between my friend and you there is nothing further beyond an interchange of gracious offices. I am, therefore, authorized to give you the length of my friend's sword —'"

"What!" cried Raoul.

"Wait a moment! — 'the length of my friend's sword. I have a horse waiting below; my friend is in such a place impatiently awaiting your charming society; I will conduct you to him;' we pick up a second on the way and the affair is arranged."

"What!" cried Raoul again, pale with vexation, "you reconcile the adversaries on the field?"

"What did you say?" broke in Porthos. "Reconcile them? What for?"

"You said the affair was arranged."

"Without question, since my friend is awaiting him."

"Well, what then? If he is awaiting him —"

"He is waiting in order to stretch his limbs, while his opponent on the other hand is still stiff from riding; they put themselves in position and my friend kills his opponent. The affair is over!"

"Ah! he kills him!" cried Raoul.

"*Pardieu!*" said Porthos; "should I be likely to make

friends of people who get themselves killed ? I have a hundred and one friends ; at the head of the list stand your father, Aramis, and D'Artagnan, all very much alive, I believe ! ”

“ Oh, my dear baron ! ” exclaimed Raoul, and in the exuberance of his joy he embraced Porthos.

“ You approve my method, then ? ” asked the giant.

“ I approve of it so thoroughly that I shall have recourse to it to-day, without delay, this very moment. You are the man I was looking for.”

“ Good ! here I am ; do you wish to fight ? ”

“ Unquestionably.”

“ That is very natural ; with whom ? ”

“ With M. de Saint-Aignan.”

“ I know him — a charming fellow who was very civil to me the day I had the honor of dining with the King. Most certainly I shall return his civility, even if it were not my habit. So he has offended you ? ”

“ Mortally.”

“ The devil ! I can say a mortal offence ? ”

“ More still, if you please.”

“ That will be a great convenience.”

“ Then that is a quarrel made up, is it not ? ” asked Raoul, with a smile.

“ That is a matter of course — where are you to meet ? ”

“ Ah ! excuse me, that is a delicate matter. M. de Saint-Aignan is a great friend of the King.”

“ So I have heard.”

“ And therefore if I kill him — ”

“ Oh ! you will certainly kill him. It is for you to take every precaution ; but nowadays such things offer no difficulties. If you had lived in our time it would have been a different matter.”

“ My dear friend, you do not understand me. I mean to say that since M. de Saint-Aignan is a friend of the King, it will be more difficult to bring about a meeting, for the King might discover beforehand — ”

“ Oh, not at all ! you know my method — ‘ Monsieur, you have given mortal offence to my friend, and — ’ ”

“ Yes, I know.”

“ And then : ‘ Monsieur, the horse is below,’ and I carry him off before he has time to speak to any one.”

“ Will he let himself be carried off like that ? ”

"*Pardieu!* I should like to see it fail. It would be the first time! It is true that these young men of to-day — Bah! I will take him by force, if necessary," and suiting the action to the word, Porthos lifted Raoul and his chair in his arms.

"Very well," said the young man, laughing. "It only remains, then, to put the question to M. de Saint-Aignan."

"What question?"

"That of the cause of offence."

"But that is done already, it seems to me."

"No, my dear M. du Vallon, the custom of the day among us requires that we should explain the grounds of offence."

"By your new method, yes — well, tell me the whole affair, then."

"But it is —"

"Ah, you see! that is the trouble! With us we had no need of telling the whole story. We fought because we fought. I don't know of a better reason, for my part."

"You are right, my friend."

"But I am waiting to hear your reasons."

"I should have too much to tell. Still, since we must come to particulars —"

"Yes, yes, the devil take it! — by your new methods."

"Since we must come to particulars, as I was saying, and since, on the other hand, the affair is full of difficulties and demands absolute secrecy —"

"Oh, oh!"

"You will oblige me by merely saying to M. de Saint-Aignan — who will understand you perfectly — that he has given me offence, in the first place, by changing his lodgings."

"By changing his lodgings — good!" said Porthos, beginning to count on his fingers. "Next?"

"Next by having a trap-door made in his new lodgings."

"I understand," said Porthos; "a trap-door, indeed! The deuce! that is serious; you have every reason to be in a rage. What does the fellow mean by having trap-doors made without consulting you? Trap-doors, *mordious*! I have none myself except in my dungeons at Bracieux."

"You may add," continued Raoul, "that my last reason for considering myself insulted is a certain portrait which M. de Saint-Aignan knows well."

"What! a portrait besides? A change of lodging, a trap-door, and a portrait? Why, my friend," said Porthos, "with

only one such grievance there is enough to embroil all the gentlemen in France and Spain, and that is not saying little."

"Then you are sufficiently provided, my friend?"

"I shall take a second horse. Choose your place of rendezvous, and while you are waiting there you can try a few passes to put yourself in a state of elasticity."

"Thanks! I shall await you in the wood of Vincennes, near the Minimes."

"That is well. Where is M. de Saint-Aignan to be found?"

"At the Palais-Royal."

Porthos rang a huge bell, and as his valet appeared, he said:

"My court suit, my horse, and a led horse." The valet bowed and left the room.

"Does your father know of this?" Porthos then asked.

"No, I am about to write to him."

"And D'Artagnan?"

"Nor M. d'Artagnan, either; he is very prudent, you know, he would have tried to dissuade me."

"D'Artagnan is an excellent adviser, though," said Porthos, amazed in his modest loyalty that any one should think of consulting him when there was a D'Artagnan in the world.

"Dear M. du Vallon," replied Raoul, "do not question me, I entreat you. I have said all I have to say. It is action I want now: I wish it to be rude and decisive action such as you know how to bring about. That is why I have chosen you."

"You will be satisfied with me," said Porthos.

"And remember, dear friend, that except ourselves, all the world must ignore this meeting."

"Such things are always found out," said Porthos, "when they discover a dead body in the wood. I can promise you anything, my friend, except to conceal the body. It is there; somebody sees it; it is not to be helped. I have made it a principle never to bury — that has a smack of the assassin. 'Risk for risk,' as the Norman proverb says."

"To work, then, my brave friend."

"Trust in me," said the giant, while he finished the bottle, during which time his valet was laying out a gorgeous coat and the laces to be worn with it.

As for Raoul, he went on his way, saying to himself, with secret joy: "Oh, perfidious King! Traitor King! I cannot reach you, nor do I wish it, — the persons of kings are sacred.

But your accomplice, the servile coward who is your representative, shall pay for your crime.

“ I shall kill him in your name, and after that is done we will think of Louise ! ”

CHAPTER XV.

THE CHANGE OF LODGING, THE TRAP-DOOR, AND THE PORTRAIT.

PORTHOS, intrusted, to his great delight, with this mission, which renewed his youth, spent a half hour less than was his custom over a ceremonious toilet. Like a man accustomed to the great world, he had sent his lackey in the first place to inquire whether M. de Saint-Aignan was at home. He received an answer to the effect that M. de Saint-Aignan had just had the honor of accompanying the King to Saint-Germain, with the whole court, but that M. le Comte had at that moment returned home. Upon this reply, Porthos made all possible haste, and reached Saint-Aignan's apartment just as the latter was having his boots pulled off.

The ride had been a superb one. The King, more and more in love, and ever more flushed with happiness, had been in the most charming humor towards every one. He had showered favors beyond all mortal favors — as the poets of the day were in the habit of saying.

M. de Saint-Aignan, as we may remember, was a poet, and considered that he had given proof thereof on so many memorable occasions that no one could dispute his claim to the title. Indefatigable rhymester that he was, he had showered quatrains, rondeaux, and madrigals all the way, first over the King, then over La Vallière. The King, on his side, had composed a distich, while La Vallière, like all women in love, had made two sonnets. Thus, as we see, the day had not been a bad one for Apollo.

On his return to Paris Saint-Aignan, who knew beforehand that his verses would circulate among all the *ruelles*, had set himself to polish a little more than had been possible during the ride both his ideas and his style. Consequently, like a tender father who is about to start his children in life, he was

asking himself whether the public would find these offspring of his imagination correct, elegant, and graceful. So, in order to make his mind easy, M. de Saint-Aignan was reciting to himself the following madrigal, which he had repeated to the King, from memory, and which he had promised to write down for him on his return :

*" Iris, vos yeux malins ne disent pas toujours
Ce que votre pensée à votre cœur confie ;
Iris, pourquoi faut-il que je passe ma vie
A plus aimer vos yeux qui m'ont joué ces tours ? "*¹

This madrigal, graceful though it was, did not strike Saint-Aignan as quite perfect the moment it passed from oral tradition to manuscript poetry. Many had thought it charming, the author first of all ; but on second view he did not fancy it so much. Thus Saint-Aignan, seated at his table with his legs crossed, and rubbing his brow, was repeating :

" Iris, vos yeux malins ne disent pas toujours —

" Oh ! as to that line," he murmured to himself, " it is irreproachable. I might even add that it has a little air of Ronsard or Malherbe, which pleases me very well. Unhappily, I cannot say as much for the second. The saying is quite true that the easiest line to write is the first line ;" and he proceeded :

" Ce que votre pensée à votre cœur confie —

" Ah, there we have a thought confiding in the heart ! Why should not the heart confide, just as well, in the thought ? Faith ! I see nothing to prevent. Why the devil did I combine these two hemistichs ? The third, now, is good :

" Iris, pourquoi faut-il que je passe ma vie —

although it is not a rich rhyme — *vie* and *confie*. But, faith ! the Abbé Boyer, who is a great poet, has made *vie* and *confie* rhyme, just as I have, in his tragedy of ' Orapaste, or the False Tonaxare ;' without mentioning that M. Corneille had no scruples about it in ' Sophonisba.' Good, then, for *vie* and *con-*

¹ " Iris fair, your arch eyes do not always betray
The thought which your soul for your heart has in store.
Iris, why must I spend my life thus — more and more
In loving those eyes that such sly tricks can play ? "

je! Yes, but it is an impertinent line. I remember that the King bit his nail at the moment; in truth, it sounds as if he were saying to Mademoiselle de la Vallière: ‘How does it come about that I am bewitched by you?’ I believe it would have been better to say:

“*Que bénis soient les dieux qui condamnent ma vie.*”

“*Condamnent!* Ah, yes, that would have been a compliment! The King condemned to La Vallière — no!” Then he repeated:

“*Mais bénis les dieux qui soient destinent ma vie.*”

“That is not bad, although *destinent ma vie* is weak; but on my word! everything cannot be perfect in a quatrain. *A plus aimer vos yeux.*”

“In loving more whom? what? Obscurity; but obscurity is nothing. Since the King and La Vallière understood me, the whole world will understand. But here is something sad! — this last hemistich: *Qui m’ont joué ces tours.* The plural required by the rhyme! and then to call La Vallière’s modesty a trick! That was not a happy touch. I shall be pulled to pieces by all my brother-scribblers. They will call my poetry the verses of a *grand seigneur*, and if the King hears it said that I am a bad poet, it will, perhaps, occur to him to believe it.”

And while he was confiding these words to his heart and his heart to his thoughts, the count was proceeding to disrobe himself. He had taken off his coat and vest, and was putting on his dressing-gown, when he was informed that M. le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds had asked to see him.

“Eh!” said he, “what is this bunch of names? I know no such person.”

“It is the gentleman,” replied the lackey, “who had the honor of dining with M. le Comte at the King’s table while his Majesty was at Fontainebleau.”

“With the King at Fontainebleau?” cried Saint-Aignan. “Well, quick, quick! introduce the gentleman.”

The lackey hastened to obey, and Porthos was ushered in.

M. de Saint-Aignan had the courtier’s memory; at the first glance, therefore, he recognized the country gentleman with the extraordinary reputation, whom the King had received so graciously at Fontainebleau, in spite of the derisive smiles of some of the officers who were present. He therefore came

forward to greet Porthos with an affability which the latter accepted quite naturally — he who always unfurled, on visiting an adversary, the standard of the most exquisite politeness. Saint-Aignan had a chair placed for Porthos by the lackey who had introduced him, and Porthos, seeing no exaggeration in all these courtesies, seated himself and gave a preliminary cough.

The usual civilities were exchanged between the two gentlemen, then the count, being the host, said :

“M. le Baron, to what happy chance do I owe the favor of your visit ?”

“That is what I am about to have the honor of explaining to you, M. le Comte ; but excuse me —”

“What is it, monsieur ?” asked Saint-Aignan.

“I perceive that I am breaking down your chair.”

“Not at all, monsieur,” said Saint-Aignan, “not at all.”

“It is too true, M. le Comte, and if I remain in it I shall certainly get a fall — a position most unsuitable to the serious mission which has brought me to you.”

Porthos thereupon rose, and only just in time, for the chair had already given way several inches. De Saint-Aignan looked about him for some more solid article in which to seat his guest.

“Modern furniture,” remarked Porthos, while the count was looking for the chair, “modern furniture has become ridiculously fragile. In my youth, when I was in the habit of sitting down with much more energy than at present, I never remember to have broken a chair, except in taverns with my arms.”

Saint-Aignan smiled amiably at this jest.

“But,” proceeded Porthos, after seating himself upon a couch, which groaned beneath his weight, but held firm, “it is not of that which I have to speak, unfortunately.”

“Why unfortunately ? Are you the bearer of an ill-omened message, M. le Baron ?”

“Ill-omened for a gentleman ? Oh, no, M. le Comte,” replied Porthos, nobly. “I have merely come to inform you that you have cruelly offended one of my friends.”

“I, monsieur ?” cried Saint-Aignan ; “I have offended a friend of yours ? Who may it be, I beg ?”

“M. Raoul de Bragelonne.”

“I have given offence to M. de Bragelonne ?” exclaimed De Saint-Aignan. “I assure you, sir, it is quite impossible, for

M. de Bragelonne, whom I know very slightly, whom in fact I may say I do not know at all, is in England. Not having seen him for a long time, I cannot possibly have given him any cause for offence."

"M. de Bragelonne is in Paris, M. le Comte," said Porthos, quite unmoved, "and as for your having offended him I can answer for it, since he told me so himself. Yes, M. le Comte, you have cruelly, mortally offended him, I repeat the word."

"But it is impossible, M. le Baron, I swear to you it is impossible."

"Moreover," added Porthos, "you cannot be in ignorance of the fact, since M. de Bragelonne assured me that he had already warned you by a note."

"I have received no note, monsieur, I give you my word."

"That is extraordinary!" replied Porthos, "since Raoul said —"

"I will prove to you that I have received none," said Saint-Aignan, and he rang the bell. "Basque," he said to the servant who entered, "how many notes or letters came for me during my absence?"

"Three, M. le Comte; one was a note from M. de Fiesque, one from Madame de la Ferté, and the letter from M. de las Fuentes."

"Are those all?"

"All, M. le Comte."

"Speak the truth before monsieur — the truth, do you hear me? I will be answerable for you."

"Monsieur, there was also the note from —"

"From whom? Speak quickly, come!"

"From Mademoiselle de la Val —"

"That will do," interrupted Porthos, discreetly. "Very well! I believe you, M. le Comte."

Saint-Aignan dismissed the valet and closed the door himself after him; then as he came back, looking straight before him he saw in the keyhole of the adjoining room the famous paper which Bragelonne had slipped in there before leaving.

"What is this?" he said.

Porthos, who had his back to the door, turned his head. "Oh, oh!" said he.

"A note in the keyhole!" exclaimed De Saint-Aignan.

"That may be the very one, M. le Comte. Look!" said Porthos.

Saint-Aignan took out the paper. "A note from M. de Bragelonne," he cried.

"You see I was right. Oh! when I state a thing —"

"Brought here by M. de Bragelonne in person," murmured the count, turning pale. "But this is shameful! How could he possibly have made his way in here?"

M. de Saint-Aignan rang again, and on Basque's reëntering, inquired:

"Who has been here while I was away on my ride with the King?"

"No one, monsieur."

"That is impossible! Some one must have been here."

"But, monsieur, no one could enter, since I had the keys in my pocket."

"Nevertheless this note was in the keyhole of that door. Some one must have put it there, it could not have come alone."

Basque spread out his hands in a gesture expressing absolute ignorance.

"It was probably M. de Bragelonne who placed it there," said Porthos.

"Then he must have entered here."

"Without doubt, monsieur."

"But how, since I have the key in my pocket?" repeated Basque, persistently.

Saint-Aignan crumpled up the note without reading it.

"There is something beneath all this," he muttered abstractedly. Porthos left him awhile to his reflections, then he reverted to his message.

"Would it please you to return to our affair?" he asked, addressing Saint-Aignan, after the valet had departed.

"But I believe I understand it now by this note which has reached me so strangely. M. de Bragelonne is about to send a friend to me —"

"I am the friend. It is my coming which he announced to you."

"To bring me a challenge?"

"Precisely."

"And he complains that I have offended him?"

"Yes, cruelly, mortally."

"In what manner, I beg of you? For his conduct is too mysterious for me not to attempt at least to find some reason for it."

"Monsieur," replied Porthos, "my friend must be in the right; and as to his conduct, if it is as mysterious as you say, you have only yourself to blame for it."

Porthos pronounced the last words with a confidence which to a man unaccustomed to his ways must have revealed an infinity of meaning.

"Mystery, so be it! Let us look into this mystery," said Saint-Aignan.

But Porthos only bowed. "You will permit me not to enter into that subject, monsieur, and for the best of reasons."

"Which I understand perfectly. Yes, monsieur, we will touch upon it lightly, then. I am listening."

"The first reason is that you have changed your lodging, monsieur," said Porthos.

"It is true enough; I have changed my lodging," said Saint-Aignan.

"You acknowledge it?" rejoined Porthos, with visible satisfaction.

"Do I acknowledge it? Certainly I do. Why should I deny it?"

"You have admitted it. Good!" noted Porthos, raising one finger.

"Now, then, monsieur, how can my change of residence have caused any injury to M. de Bragelonne? Answer me; for I understand nothing at all of what you are saying."

Porthos stopped him, and said very gravely: "Monsieur, this grievance is the first of those that M. de Bragelonne brings against you. Since he has brought it forward, it is because he feels himself wounded."

Saint-Aignan stamped on the floor with impatience. "This looks like a trumped-up quarrel," he said.

"There could not be such a thing as a trumped-up quarrel with a gallant gentleman like the Vicomte de Bragelonne," replied Porthos; "but, in short, you have nothing further to add, then, upon the subject of your change of lodging?"

"No; what next?"

"Ah! what next? But take notice, monsieur, that here is one abominable grievance to which you have given no answer, or rather have answered ill. What, monsieur! you change your lodging, and thereby offend M. de Bragelonne, and you have no excuse to offer? Very well!"

"What!" cried Saint-Aignan, who was becoming irritated

by the coolness of this personage, "I am to consult M. de Bragelonne as to whether I shall move or not? Come, come, monsieur!"

"Obligatory, monsieur, obligatory! However, you will admit that this is nothing compared with the second grievance;" and Porthos assumed an air of severity. "What of the trap-door, monsieur?"

Saint-Aignan at this turned excessively pale and pushed back his chair so suddenly that Porthos, simple though he was, perceived that the blow had struck home.

"The trap-door?" faltered Saint-Aignan.

"Yes, monsieur; explain that away if you can."

Saint-Aignan bent his head.

"Some one has betrayed me," he murmured; "all is known!"

"Everything is always known," replied Porthos, who knew nothing.

"You see me overwhelmed," pursued Saint-Aignan, "overwhelmed to such a degree that I know not what to say."

"Guilty conscience, monsieur! Oh! your case is a bad one."

"Monsieur —"

"And when the public is informed of it, and passes judgment on it —"

"But, monsieur," replied the count, earnestly, "such a secret should be ignored even by the confessor."

"We will consider the matter," said Porthos; "the secret will not go far, at any rate."

"And, monsieur," resumed Saint-Aignan, "does M. de Bragelonne realize the danger he runs himself into and brings upon others by penetrating such a secret?"

"M. de Bragelonne runs no danger, monsieur, and fears none, as you will soon experience."

"This fellow is a madman," thought Saint-Aignan. "What does he want with me?"

Then he added aloud:

"Come, monsieur, let us hush up this matter."

"You forget the portrait," said Porthos, in a voice of thunder which froze the blood in the count's veins.

Since the portrait was that of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and there was no longer room for doubt on this point, Saint-Aignan felt his eyes at last unsealed.

"Ah!" he cried, "monsieur, I now remember that M. de Bragelonne was betrothed to her."

Porthos assumed an imposing air, the majesty of ignorance.

"It matters nothing to me, nor does it to you," he said, "whether my friend should be betrothed or not to her of whom you speak. I am surprised, indeed, that you should have pronounced so indiscreet a word. It might greatly injure your cause, monsieur."

"Monsieur, you are delicacy, loyalty, and good sense personified. I see perfectly now what is in question."

"So much the better!" remarked Porthos.

"And you have given me to understand what it is," pursued Saint-Aignan, "in the most ingenious, the most exquisite manner. I thank you, monsieur, I thank you."

Porthos bridled at this.

"Only now that I know all, permit me to explain —"

Porthos shook his head as one who does not wish to hear, but Saint-Aignan went on:

"I am in despair, you must see, over all that has happened; but what would you have done in my place? Come, between ourselves, tell me what you would have done."

Porthos raised his head:

"It is not a question of what I should have done, young man; you have been made aware, have you not, of our three grievances?"

"As to the first, the change of lodging, monsieur, I put it to you as a man of sense and of honor; when the will of an august personage so plainly signified to me that I was to move, could I, ought I to disobey?"

Porthos made a gesture, to which Saint-Aignan, interpreting it in his own manner, responded:

"Ah, my frankness moves you, I see. You feel that I was right."

Porthos made no reply.

"As to that unfortunate trap-door," pursued Saint-Aignan, pressing Porthos' arm with his hand, "that trap-door, the cause of evil, the means of evil, constructed for the purpose you know — can you in good faith imagine that I, of my own free will, would have had a trap-door opened in such a spot, for such a purpose? Oh, no! you cannot believe it, and here again you feel, you divine, you understand a will above my own. You realize the infatuation. I do not speak of love,

that irresistible madness — great heavens! Happily I have a man of heart, of sensibility to deal with, otherwise what scandal and wretchedness would be brought upon her, poor child! and upon him — whom I dare not name!”

Porthos, stuuned, bewildered by this torrent of eloquence, and by Saint-Aignan's frantic gestures, made a thousand efforts to sit upright and immovable under this flood of words, not a single one of which he understood, and he succeeded.

Saint-Aignan, fairly launched upon his peroration, went on with a rising inflection in his voice and increased vehemence of gesture:

“As to the portrait, — for I understand perfectly that the portrait is the crowning grievance — as to this portrait, look you, am I the culprit? Who wished for her portrait, — was it I? Who is in love with her, — is it I? Who desires her, who has won her, — is it I? No, a thousand times no! I know that M. de Bragelonne must be in despair. I know that such misfortunes are cruel indeed. Look you, I too suffer. But is resistance possible? If he struggles he will be laughed at; if he persists, he will be ruined.

“You will tell me that despair leads to madness; but you are reasonable, you understand me. I see by your serious, thoughtful air, your look of perplexity even, that you are struck by the gravity of the situation. Return, then, to M. de Bragelonne; thank him in my name for having sent, as his messenger, a man of your merit. Believe me that, on my part, I shall hold in grateful remembrance him who has pacified the discord between us in so ingenious, so intelligent a manner. And since ill-luck would have it that this secret should be shared by four instead of by three, I am glad to share with you, monsieur, a secret which may make the fortune of the most ambitious of men. Yes, I rejoice with all my heart. From this moment you may dispose of me as you will, I place myself at your mercy. What can I do for you? What may I solicit for you, demand, even? Speak, monsieur, speak!”

And in the familiarly friendly fashion of courtiers at that period, Saint-Aignan threw his arms around Porthos, and clasped him in a tender embrace. Porthos submitted with amazing coolness.

“Speak!” repeated Saint-Aignan, “what do you desire?”

“Monsieur,” said Porthos, “I have a horse below; will you

do me the favor to mount him? He is well trained and will play you no tricks."

"Mount your horse? and for what purpose?" asked Saint-Aignan, blankly.

"To ride with me to the place where M. de Bragelonne is waiting for us."

"Ah, he wishes to speak to me! I understand, he wishes for details. Alas, that is a very delicate matter! and at this moment it is impossible, the King is waiting for me."

"The King must wait," said Porthos.

"But where is M. de Bragelonne expecting me?"

"At the Minimes, at Vincennes."

"What do you mean? Is this a jest?"

"I think not—at least not on my part," and Porthos assumed the most stern rigidity of expression.

"But the Minimes is a rendezvous for duels. What have I to do at the Minimes, then?"

Porthos deliberately drew his sword and said: "That is the length of my friend's sword."

"*Corbleu!* this man is mad," cried Saint-Aignan.

The color mounted to Porthos' ears, as he said: "Monsieur, if I had not the honor of being in your own apartments, and if I were not here in M. de Bragelonne's interest, I would throw you out of the window. As it is, it shall be simply postponed, and you will lose nothing by the delay. Are you coming to the Minimes, monsieur?"

"Eh!"

"Are you coming of your own free will?"

"But—"

"Otherwise I shall carry you. Take care!"

"Basque," cried M. de Saint-Aignan. Basque entered.

"The King has summoned M. le Comte," he said.

"That is a different matter," said Porthos; "the King's service before all. We will wait until this evening, monsieur." And bowing to Saint-Aignan with his wonted courtesy, Porthos left the room, enchanted at having made up one more quarrel.

Saint-Aignan watched him as he went out; then hurriedly slipping on his coat and vest, he set forth on the run, repairing the disorder of his toilet on the way, and saying to himself:

"The Minimes! The Minimes, indeed! We shall see what the King says to this challenge. For it is undoubtedly for him, *pardieu!*"

CHAPTER XVI.

POLITICAL RIVALS.

THE King, on his return from that ride which had been so fruitful in tributes to Apollo and the muses, as the poets of that period would say, found M. Fouquet awaiting him. Behind the King came M. Colbert, who had been lying in wait for him in the corridor, and who now followed him like a watchful and jealous shadow, — M. Colbert, with his square head, and that coarse, untidy richness of apparel which gave him something the aspect of a beer-drinking Flemish lord.

M. Fouquet at sight of his enemy retained his calm, and, during the scene which followed, studied to preserve the difficult attitude of a superior whose heart is overflowing with contempt towards his inferior, but who does not wish to show this contempt lest he should thereby be doing his opponent too much honor.

Colbert, on the other hand, did not attempt to hide his insulting triumph. In his eyes, M. Fouquet was playing a game which was badly played and already lost, although it was not quite played out. Colbert belonged to that school of political men who admire only dexterity, and respect only success. Moreover, Colbert was not merely a jealous rival, but a man who had the King's interests at heart — being gifted, after all, with supreme probity in matters of finance — and could claim the pretext for his hatred that in destroying M. Fouquet he was acting for the good of the State and the dignity of the crown.

None of these details escaped Fouquet. Beneath his enemy's heavy brows and incessantly moving eyelids he could look through the eyes into the depth of Colbert's heart and read the hatred and triumph there. Only, since while reading the other, he wished to remain impenetrable himself, he smoothed his countenance, smiled the charming, sympathetic smile which belonged only to him, and saluting the King with his noblest and most supple grace :

"Sire," he said, "I see by your Majesty's joyous air that your ride was an agreeable one."

"Charming indeed, M. le Surintendant, charming! You should have come with us as I invited you to do."

"Sire, I was at work," replied the superintendent, who did not even trouble himself to turn his head and look in Colbert's direction.

"Ah, the country! M. Fouquet," cried the King. "*Pardieu!* how I should like to live always in the country, in the open air, beneath the trees."

"Oh! your Majesty is not yet weary of the throne, I trust."

"No, but thrones of verdure are full of charm."

"In truth, Sire, you gratify my every wish by these words; for I was about to present a request to you."

"From whom, M. le Surintendant?"

"From the nymphs of Vaux, Sire."

"Ah! ah!" said Louis XIV.

"The King once deigned to make me a promise," said Fouquet.

"Yes, I remember."

"The fête at Vaux, the famous fête, was it not, Sire?" said Colbert, attempting to give a proof of his favor by joining in the conversation.

Fouquet passed over this remark with silent contempt, as if for him Colbert had not spoken or thought.

"Your Majesty is aware," he pursued, "that I destine my estate of Vaux to receive the most amiable of princes, the mightiest of kings."

"I have promised, monsieur," said Louis XIV., smiling, "and a King has only his word."

"And I have now come to say to your Majesty that I am entirely at your orders."

"Do you promise me a host of marvels, M. le Surintendant?" said Louis XIV., with a glance at Colbert.

"Marvels? Oh, no, Sire, I do not pledge myself so far, but I hope I may venture to promise the King a little pleasure, and perhaps even a little forgetfulness."

"Nay, nay, M. Fouquet," replied the King, "I insist on the marvels. Oh, we know that you are a magician, we know your power, and that you could find gold if there were none in the world. People even say that you make it."

Fouquet felt that this was a shot from a double quiver, and that the King had launched an arrow from his own bow and one from Colbert's at the same time; but he merely laughed as he replied:

"Oh, the people know quite well from what mine I draw

this gold. They know it too well, it may be. Moreover, Sire," he added proudly, "I can assure your Majesty that the gold destined to pay for the fête at Vaux will cost neither blood nor tears; the sweat of labor, perhaps, but that will be repaid."

Louis was confounded; he tried to look at Colbert, and Colbert tried to reply, but an eagle glance from Fouquet, a loyal, even royal glance, checked the words upon his lips. The King, meantime, had recovered himself, and turning again to Fouquet said to him:

"This is, then, an invitation in form."

"Yes, Sire, if it so please your Majesty."

"For what day?"

"For whatever day will suit you, Sire."

"You speak like an enchanter who can improvise, M. Fouquet. I should not venture to promise so much."

"Your Majesty can do when you wish all that a king can and should do. The King of France has servants capable of all things for his service and for his pleasures."

Colbert strove to catch the superintendent's eye, to see whether this speech indicated a return to less hostile sentiments toward himself; but Fouquet did not even glance at his enemy. For him Colbert did not exist.

"Very well, then; a week hence, if you please," said the King.

"A week hence, Sire."

"This is Tuesday. Shall we appoint next Sunday week?"

"The delay which your Majesty deigns to grant will greatly assist the labors which my architects will undertake with a view to the entertainment of your Majesty and your friends."

"And, speaking of my friends," returned the King, "how do you name them?"

"The King is master everywhere, Sire. Your Majesty shall draw up the list, and give your own orders. All whom he deigns to invite shall be highly honored guests of mine."

"Thanks," replied the King, touched by this noble thought, expressed with a noble accent.

Fouquet thereupon took his leave of Louis XIV., after a few words devoted to certain details of business. He was conscious that Colbert would remain with the King, that they would discuss him as soon as he was gone, and that neither would spare him. But the satisfaction of giving a final blow, a terrible blow, to his enemy appeared to him a sufficient com-

pensation for all he was to suffer. He therefore turned back quickly just as he had reached the door and addressed the King, saying:

"Pardon, Sire, pardon."

"What is there to pardon?" asked the prince, with amenity.

"A grave fault, Sire, which I was committing unawares."

"A fault of yours, M. Fouquet? I must certainly pardon you. Against what have you sinned, or against whom?"

"Against all propriety, Sire. I was forgetting to inform your Majesty of a somewhat important occurrence."

"What is that?"

Colbert shuddered; he expected a denunciation. His conduct, he thought, had been unmasked. One word from Fouquet, a single proof advanced, and before the youthful loyalty of Louis XIV. Colbert's favor would melt away. He trembled, therefore, lest a bold stroke should overthrow his whole scaffolding, and in fact the stroke was so fine a one to play that Aramis, the skilful player, could not well have missed it.

"Sire," said Fouquet, with an easy air, "since you have the goodness to forgive me, my confession is made the easier. This morning I sold one of my appointments."

"One of your appointments?" cried the King. "Which one?" Colbert meanwhile had turned livid.

"The one, Sire, which conferred on me a long robe and an air of gravity — the post of procureur-général."

The King gave an involuntary cry, and looked at Colbert, who, with a cold sweat starting from his brow, was on the point of fainting.

"To whom did you sell this post, M. Fouquet?" asked the King.

Colbert leant against the mantelpiece for support.

"To a counsellor of parliament, Sire, a certain M. Vanel."

"Vanel?"

"A friend of the intendant Colbert," added Fouquet, letting the words drop with inimitable nonchalance, with an expression of unconsciousness and forgetfulness which neither painter, poet, nor actor could reproduce. Then having dealt his blow, having crushed Colbert under the weight of his superiority, the superintendent saluted the King once more and departed, feeling himself in a measure avenged by the stupefaction of the prince and the humiliation of the favorite.

"Is it really possible?" said the King, as soon as Fouquet had disappeared. "He has sold his office?"

"Yes, Sire," replied Colbert, significantly.

"He is mad," hazarded the King.

Colbert this time made no reply: he had caught a glimpse of his master's unuttered thought. That thought avenged him in his turn; jealousy had been added to his hatred, and a threat of disgrace to his plan for Fouquet's ruin. Henceforth Colbert felt assured that between Louis XIV. and himself hostile schemes could encounter no obstacle, and that the first false step of Fouquet's, which could serve as a pretext, would precipitate his punishment. Fouquet had let fall his weapons. Hate and jealousy had picked them up.

Colbert was invited to the fête at Vaux by the King; he bowed like a man sure of his position, and accepted like one who confers a favor.

The King had reached Saint-Aignan's name upon his list of invitations, when the usher announced the Comte de Saint-Aignan. Colbert retired discreetly, upon the entrance of the royal Mercury.

CHAPTER XVII.

RIVAL LOVERS.

SAINT-AIGNAN had parted from Louis XIV. scarcely two hours before; but in this first effervescence of his love, when Louis XIV. could not see La Vallière he was obliged to talk of her. Now, as the only person to whom he could speak of her quite at his ease was Saint-Aignan, the latter had become indispensable to him.

"Ah, it is you, count!" he cried, on perceiving him, doubly rejoiced at seeing his friend and being rid of Colbert, whose scowling visage always depressed him: "So much the better! I am glad to see you; you will join us on this journey, will you not?"

"What journey, Sire?" inquired Saint-Aignan.

"The one we shall shortly be making to Vaux for the fête M. le Surintendant proposes to give us. Ah! Saint-Aignan,

you will see a fête at last beside which our diversions at Fontainebleau are mere child's play."

"At Vaux? The superintendent is giving a fête to your Majesty, and at Vaux; is that all?"

"Is that all? You are charming with your disdainful airs. Do you know, you who are playing at indifference, that when it is known that M. Fouquet is to receive me at Vaux, on Sunday week, — do you know that people will be at daggers drawn for an invitation to this fête? I repeat, then, Saint-Aignan, that you are to take the journey with us."

"Yes, if between now and then I have not taken a longer and much less agreeable one."

"What is that?"

"Across the Styx, Sire."

"Fie!" said Louis XIV., laughing.

"No, Sire, in all seriousness," replied Saint-Aignan, "I have been invited to take it and in such a fashion that I scarce know how to refuse."

"I do not understand you, my friend. I know that you are in a poetic mood, but try not to drop from Apollo to Phœbus."

"Very well, then, if your Majesty will deign to listen to me I will not keep my King any longer in suspense."

"Speak!"

"Does the King know M. le Baron du Vallon?"

"*Pardieu!* yes, a good servant of the king my father, and a jovial guest, on my word! for you are speaking of him who dined with us at Fontainebleau, are you not?"

"The very same; but your Majesty has forgotten to add to his other qualities that of a most amiable man-killer."

"What! he wishes to kill you, this M. du Vallon?"

"Yes, or to have me killed, which comes to the same thing."

"Upon my soul!"

"Do not laugh, Sire. What I am telling you is the simple truth."

"And you say that he wishes to kill you?"

"That is his idea for the moment, the worthy gentleman!"

"Do not be uneasy! I will defend you if he is in the wrong."

"Ah! there is an 'if'?"

"Without doubt. Come, answer me as if it concerned another, my poor Saint-Aignan, is he right or wrong?"

"Your Majesty shall be the judge."

"What have you done to him?"

"Ah! nothing to him, but it appears that I have offended one of his friends."

"It is the same thing; and is his friend one of the famous Four?"

"No, he is the son of one of the famous Four; that is all!"

"What have you done to the son? Let us hear!"

"Faith! I have helped some one to rob him of his mistress."

"And you confess such a thing?"

"I am forced to confess it, since it is true."

"In that case you are in the wrong."

"Oh! I am in the wrong, am I?"

"Yes, and by my faith! if he kills you —"

"Well?"

"Well, he will be doing quite right."

"Ah! that is, then, your judgment, Sire?"

"Do you regard it as a bad one?"

"It is expeditious, to say the least."

"'Swift justice is good justice,' said my grandfather, Henri IV."

"Then your Majesty must hasten to sign a pardon for my adversary, who is waiting at the Minimes to kill me."

"Give me his name and a parchment."

"Sire, there is a parchment on your Majesty's table, and as to his name —"

"Well, his name?"

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne, Sire."

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne?" cried the King, passing from merriment to a state of stupor. Then after a moment of silence, during which he wiped away the perspiration streaming from his brow: "Bragelonne!" he murmured.

"No more nor less, Sire," replied Saint-Aignan.

"Bragelonne, the betrothed of —"

"Oh, without a doubt! Bragelonne, the betrothed of —"

"But he was certainly in London?"

"Yes, but I can assure you that he is there no longer, Sire."

"He is in Paris, then?"

"Yes, or rather at the Minimes, where he is waiting for me, as I have had the honor of informing your Majesty."

"And he knows all?"

"Yes, and a great deal besides! Would your Majesty care to glance at the note he sent me?" and Saint-Aignan drew from his pocket the note we already know. "When you

Majesty has read this," he said, "I shall have the honor of informing you how it reached me!"

The King read it in great agitation.

"Well, what next?" he demanded.

"Your Majesty is familiar with a certain wrought lock, closing a certain ebony door which separates a certain chamber from a certain blue and white sanctuary?"

"Certainly, Louise's boudoir."

"Yes, Sire. Well, it is in the keyhole of that lock that I found this note. Who placed it there, M. de Bragelonne or the devil? However, since the note is scented with amber instead of sulphur, I conclude that it must have been, not the devil, but M. de Bragelonne."

Louis bowed his head and seemed absorbed in melancholy reflections; perchance at this moment some feeling of remorse stirred his heart.

"Oh!" he cried, "the secret is discovered!"

"Sire, I shall do my best that the secret may die in the breast which now holds it," said Saint-Aignan, in a tone of truly Spanish chivalry, and he took a step towards the door.

The King stopped him by a gesture.

"And where are you going?" he asked.

"Where they are waiting for me, Sire."

"For what purpose?"

"To fight, probably."

"To fight!" cried the King. "A moment, if you please, M. le Comte."

Saint-Aignan shook his head like a wilful child who rebels when he is forbidden to throw himself into a well or play with a knife.

"But nevertheless, Sire —" he said.

"In the first place," said the King, "I am not thoroughly enlightened —"

"Oh! as to that, if your Majesty will but interrogate me, I will throw all the light in my power."

"Who told you that M. de Bragelonne had found his way into that chamber?"

"This note which I found in the keyhole, as I had the honor to inform your Majesty."

"Who assures you that it was he who put it there?"

"What other would have dared to undertake such an errand?"

"You are right. How did he obtain admittance to your apartment?"

"Ah! that is a serious question, for all the doors were locked, and my lackey, Basque, had the keys in his pocket."

"Your lackey must have been bribed, then."

"It is impossible, Sire."

"Why impossible?"

"Because if any one had bribed him they would not have ruined the poor fellow by showing plainly that they had made use of him, since they might need him again later."

"That is true. Now there is but one conjecture left."

"Let us hear, Sire, whether it is the same conjecture which has presented itself to my mind."

"It is that he must have entered by the secret staircase."

"Alas, Sire, that seems to me more probable."

"In that case some one must have sold the secret of the trap-door."

"Sold or given it."

"Why that distinction?"

"Because certain persons, Sire, being above the price of treason, do not sell, but give."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh! Sire, your Majesty has too subtle a mind not to spare me the trouble of naming the person."

"You are right; it is Madame!"

"Ah!" said Saint-Aignan.

"Madame, whose suspicions were aroused by your change of lodging —"

"Madame, who has keys to the apartments of all her maids of honor, and who is powerful enough to discover what no one but you, Sire, or she, could discover."

"And you think that my sister has formed an alliance with Bragelonne?"

"Eh! Eh! Sire —"

"So close as to communicate all these details to him?"

"Perhaps she has gone further yet."

"Further! How, then?"

"So far as to accompany him herself."

"What! down those stairs into your apartment?"

"Do you regard the thing as impossible, Sire?"

"Oh!"

"Listen! Your Majesty is aware how Madame loves perfumes?"

"Yes, it is a taste she has inherited from her mother."

"Verbena especially."

"It is indeed her favorite perfume."

"Well, Sire, my apartment is fragrant with verbena."

The King remained pensive for a while, then resumed :

"But why should Madame take the part of Bragelonne against me?"

In pronouncing these words, to which Saint-Aignan might easily have replied, "A woman's jealousy," the King was sounding his friend to the depths of his heart to read there whether he had discovered the secret of his own gallantries with his sister-in-law. But Saint-Aignan was no ordinary courtier; he did not risk himself lightly in the discovery of family secrets; and he was too much a friend of the muses not to have meditated often over poor Ovid, whose eyes had expiated by many tears the crime of having seen, we know not what, in the palace of Augustus. He therefore skilfully eluded Madame's secret. But since he had given such a proof of sagacity in pointing out that Madame had probably accompanied Bragelonne to his apartment, he must pay the penalty of his vanity and reply clearly to the question: "Why does Madame side with Bragelonne against me?"

"Why?" replied Saint-Aignan; "your Majesty forgets, then, that M. le Comte de Guiche is the intimate friend of the Vicomte de Bragelonne?"

"I do not see the connection," answered the King.

"Ah! pardon, Sire, I thought that M. de Guiche was a great friend of Madame's."

"That is quite true," rejoined the King, "we need look no further, the blow comes from there."

"And to ward it off, Sire, shall we not deal another?"

"Yes, but not of the sort which is dealt out there in the forest of Vincennes," answered the King.

"Your Majesty forgets," said Saint-Aignan, "that I am a gentleman, and that I have received a challenge."

"This is not a matter that concerns you."

"But it is I who am expected at the Minimes, Sire, and have been waited for there this hour; and it is I who shall be dishonored if I do not go where I am awaited."

"The first honor in a gentleman is obedience to his king."

"Sire —"

"Obey me, monsieur."

“As it pleases your Majesty.”

“Moreover, I wish to clear up this affair. I must know how any one has dared so to trifle with me as to penetrate into the very shrine of my affections. Those who have done this, Saint-Aignan, cannot be left to you to punish, for it is not your honor they have assailed, but my own.”

“I implore your Majesty not to overwhelm M. de Bragelonne with your wrath, for in all this affair, though he may have lacked prudence, he has never failed in loyalty.”

“Enough! I shall know how to distinguish between the just and the unjust, even in the height of my anger. Above all, do not breathe a word of this to Madame.”

“But what shall I do in regard to M. de Bragelonne, Sire? He will be seeking me, and —”

“I shall have speech with him, or signify my pleasure to him, before the evening.”

“Once more, Sire, I implore your indulgence towards him.”

“I have been indulgent full long enough, count,” said Louis XIV., frowning. “It is time for me to show certain persons that I am master in my own court.”

The King had scarcely pronounced these words, which showed plainly that to the new grudge there was joined some remembrance of an ancient one, when the usher appeared on the threshold of the cabinet.

“What is it?” asked the King, “and why do you presume to appear when I have not called you?”

“Sire,” said the usher, “your Majesty ordered me once for all to admit M. le Comte de la Fère whenever he desired to speak to your Majesty.”

“What then?”

“M. le Comte de la Fère is outside awaiting your pleasure.”

At these words the King and Saint-Aignan exchanged a glance, in which there was more anxiety than surprise. Louis hesitated a moment; then suddenly forming a resolution:

“Go,” he said to Saint-Aignan, “and find Louise; inform her of all that is being designed against us. Do not leave her in ignorance that Madame has renewed her persecutions, and that she has brought into the field certain persons who would have better remained neutral.”

“Sire —”

“If Louise should be terrified,” continued the King, “hasten to reassure her. Tell her that the King’s love is an impenetra-

ble buckler. If, as I prefer not to believe, she already knows all, if she has had herself to endure an attack, tell her for me, Saint-Aignan," added the King, quivering with fever and passion, "tell her that this time, instead of defending her, I shall avenge her, and that so severely that no man in future will dare to raise his eyes to her."

"What more, Sire?"

"That is all. Go quickly, and be faithful, you who live in the midst of this hell without having, as I have, the hope of paradise."

Saint-Aignan exhausted himself in protestations of devotion, and after kissing the King's hand, departed radiant.

CHAPTER XVIII.

KING AND NOBILITY.

LOUIS composed himself at once in order to meet M. de la Fère with a calm face. He saw clearly that the count's visit was not due to chance. He was vaguely conscious of the import of this visit, and resolved that no confusion nor agitation should present itself at the first glance to a man of such distinction of mind and bearing as Athos. So soon as the young King was sure of presenting an appearance of unruffled calm, he ordered the ushers to introduce the count. A few moments later Athos, in full court dress, — his breast glittering with the orders which he alone of the French court had the right to wear, — Athos presented himself with so grave and solemn an air that the King was aware at once that his presentiment had not deceived him.

Louis advanced a step toward the count, and with a smile held out his hand, over which Athos bowed with deep reverence.

"M. le Comte de la Fère," said the King, rapidly, "you grant us your presence so rarely at court that it is a piece of good fortune to see you here."

Athos bowed, and replied: "I should wish for the happiness of being always near your Majesty."

This reply delivered in such a tone evidently implied: "I should wish to be one of the King's counsellors, in order to save him from grave errors." Thus the King understood it,

and, determined to preserve before this man the advantages of composure as well as of rank, pursued calmly : " I see that you have something of moment to say to me."

" But for that I should not have ventured to present myself before your Majesty."

" Speak at once, monsieur ; I am in haste to satisfy you," and the King with these words seated himself.

" I am persuaded," replied Athos, in a tone of some feeling, " that your Majesty will grant me full satisfaction."

" Ah ! " exclaimed the King, with a shade of haughtiness, " it is a complaint, then, which you have brought to me."

" It would not be a complaint," replied Athos, " if your Majesty — but pardon me, Sire, I will take up the subject from the beginning."

" I am listening."

" Your Majesty may remember that at the time of M. de Buckingham's departure I had the honor of an interview."

" Yes, I remember — at about that time ; but the subject of the conversation — I do not recall."

Athos started. " I am about to have the honor of reminding your Majesty," he proceeded, " that I then addressed you on the subject of a marriage which M. de Bragelonne wished to contract with Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

" We have come to it at last," thought the King. " I remember now," he said aloud.

" At that period," pursued Athos, " your Majesty was so kind and so generous, that not a word which fell from your Majesty's lips has escaped my memory."

" Eh ? " ejaculated the King.

" And when I asked for Mademoiselle de la Vallière's hand, on behalf of M. de Bragelonne, your Majesty refused me."

" That is true," said Louis, dryly.

" Alleging," Athos hastened to add, " that the young lady had no position in the world."

Louis constrained himself to listen with patience.

" That," added Athos, " she had little fortune."

The King buried himself more deeply in his armchair.

" That she was not of high condition."

Renewed impatience was manifest on the King's part.

" And that she had little beauty," added Athos, mercilessly.

This last stroke, driven home to the lover's heart, made him bound from his seat.

"Monsieur," he said, "you have a wondrously fine memory!"

"It is always so when I have the great honor of conversing with the King," replied the count, coolly.

"Very well, I said all this; so be it."

"And I was extremely grateful to your Majesty, because these words testified to an interest on your part in M. de Bragelonne which did him great honor."

"You may also remember," said the King, with marked emphasis, "that you had a great repugnance for this marriage."

"Very true, Sire."

"And that you asked my approval much against your will."

"Yes, your Majesty."

"In short, I remember also, for I have a memory almost as good as your own, that you spoke these words: 'I do not believe that Mademoiselle de la Vallière really loves M. de Bragelonne.' Is not that true?"

Athos felt the blow, but did not yield an inch.

"Sire," he said, "I have already asked your indulgence. There are certain things in this conversation which will become intelligible only at its conclusion."

"Let us hasten to the conclusion, then."

"It is this: Your Majesty then declared that you opposed the marriage out of regard for M. de Bragelonne's welfare."

The King was silent.

"To-day M. de Bragelonne is unhappy to that degree that he can no longer defer asking your Majesty for a final release."

The King turned pale; Athos gazed at him fixedly.

"And what," he stammered, "does he — M. de Bragelonne — request?"

"Precisely what I laid before your Majesty in our former interview, that your Majesty would consent to his marriage."

Again the King kept silence.

"All questions as to the obstacles to their union are set aside by us," continued Athos. "Mademoiselle de la Vallière without fortune, high birth, or beauty is none the less the only good match in the world for M. de Bragelonne, since he loves her."

The King clinched his hands convulsively.

"Your Majesty hesitates?" asked the count, without abatement of his firmness or his courtesy.

"I do not hesitate — I refuse," replied the King.

Athos bethought himself for a moment, then resumed, in a gentle voice: "I have had the honor of assuring your Majesty that no obstacle could arrest M. de Bragelonne's affections, and that his determination appears unalterable."

"There is my will; that is an obstacle, I believe."

"It is the most serious of all," replied Athos.

"Ah!"

"Then may we be humbly permitted to ask your Majesty the reason for this refusal?"

"The reason! You question me?" cried the King.

"It is a demand, Sire."

The King, striking his fists upon the table, spoke in a voice of concentrated passion: "You have forgotten the usages of the court, M. de la Fère. At court none question the King —"

"It is true, but if one does not question, one is drawn to suppositions."

"Suppositions! What may that signify, monsieur?"

"Suppositions on the part of the subject imply almost always lack of frankness in the king —"

"Monsieur!"

"Or lack of confidence in the subject," pursued Athos, intrepidly.

"I believe you are forgetting yourself," said the monarch, carried away, in spite of himself, by a rush of anger.

"Sire, I am forced to seek elsewhere what I thought to find in your Majesty. Instead of obtaining an answer from you I am driven to frame one for myself."

The King rose.

"M. le Comte," he said, "I have given you all the time I have at your disposition."

This was a dismissal.

"Sire," replied the count, "I have not yet had time to tell your Majesty what I came to say to you, and I so rarely have the privilege of seeing my King that I must profit by the opportunity."

"You had reached the point of suppositions in regard to your sovereign; you will now proceed to offence against him."

"Oh! Sire, offence against your Majesty! I? Never! I have all my life maintained that kings are above other men, not only by reason of their rank and power, but by their nobility of heart and valor of soul. Never shall I believe that

my sovereign, in giving me his word, held a secret purpose of his own behind that word."

"What means this? what secret purpose?"

"I will explain myself," pursued Athos, coldly. "If in refusing Mademoiselle de la Vallière's hand to M. de Bragelonne, your Majesty had another design besides the fortune and happiness of the vicomte —"

"Ah, monsieur, you see that you offend me."

"If in commanding the vicomte to delay his marriage, your Majesty wished merely to remove to a distance Mademoiselle de la Vallière's betrothed —"

"Monsieur! monsieur!"

"That is what I hear said everywhere, Sire. All the world speaks of your Majesty's love for Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

The King tore the gloves in two, which he had been biting for some moments by way of hiding his discomfiture.

"Woe to those," he cried, "who interfere in my affairs! I am resolved; I will crush all obstacles."

"What obstacles?" said Athos.

The King stopped short like a fiery horse, suddenly checked by the bit, in full career.

"I love Mademoiselle de la Vallière," he said, with as much nobility as passion.

"But," interrupted Athos, "that does not prevent your Majesty from marrying Mademoiselle de la Vallière to M. de Bragelonne. It is a sacrifice worthy of a king. It is deserved by M. de Bragelonne, who has already done the King good service and may pass for a brave man. Thus the King by renouncing his love gives proof, at once, of generosity, of gratitude, and of sound policy."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière," said the King, hoarsely, "does not love M. de Bragelonne."

"Does the King know that?" asked Athos, with a searching glance.

"I know it."

"Of late, then; for if your Majesty had known it at the time I presented my first request, doubtless your Majesty would have taken pains to tell me so then."

"Of late."

Athos remained silent for a moment.

"I do not understand, then," he resumed, "why your Majesty

should have sent M. de Bragelonne to England. That exile has justly surprised all who value the King's honor."

"Who speaks of the King's honor, M. de la Fère?"

"The honor of the King, Sire, is made up of the honor of all his nobility. When the King offends one of his gentlemen, that is to say, when he takes from him one shred of his honor, it is from himself — the King — that this scrap of honor is torn."

"M. de la Fère!"

"Sire, did you send the Vicomte de Bragelonne to London before becoming Mademoiselle de la Vallière's lover, or since you have been her lover?"

The King, incensed beyond measure, the more so that he felt himself dominated, endeavored to dismiss Athos by a gesture.

"Sire, I will tell you all," pursued the count. "I will not leave here until I have been satisfied by your Majesty or by myself; satisfied by your proving to me that you are in the right, or by my proving you in the wrong. Oh, you will listen to me, Sire! I am an old man, and I have been associated with all that is really great and really strong in your kingdom. I am a gentleman who has shed his blood for your father, and for your Majesty, without ever having asked anything from you or from your father. I have done wrong to no being in this world, and I have obliged kings! You shall listen to me! I have come to call you to account for the honor of one of your servants, whom you have deluded by a falsehood or betrayed through weakness. I know that these words irritate your Majesty, but the facts are killing us. I know that you are seeking out what chastisement to inflict on me for my frankness; but I know also what chastisement I shall pray God to inflict upon you, when I lay before him your perjury and my son's misfortune."

The King walked up and down with long strides, his hand thrust in his breast, his head held high, his eyes blazing.

"Monsieur," he suddenly cried, "if I were the king to you, you would already have been punished; but I am only a man, and I have the right to love on this earth those who love me — so rare a happiness!"

"You have no more that right as man than as king; or if you wished to take it loyally, you should have apprized M. de Bragelonne of this instead of exiling him."

"I believe in truth that I am discussing this matter with you!" interrupted Louis XIV., with that majesty which he alone knew how to impart to his look and his voice.

"I had hoped that you would answer me," said the count.

"You shall have my answer later, monsieur."

"You know my thoughts," replied M. de la Fère.

"You have forgotten that you were speaking to the King, monsieur. It is a crime."

"You have forgotten that you are destroying the lives of two men. It is a mortal sin, Sire!"

"Go! — at once!"

"Not before saying to you: Son of Louis XIII., you are beginning your reign ill, for you are beginning it by seduction and disloyalty. I and my race are released from all the affection and all the reverence towards you to which I bound my son by oath in the vaults of Saint-Denis, in presence of the mortal remains of your noble ancestors. You are become our enemy, Sire, and we have nought to do henceforth save with God, our only master. Beware, then!"

"You threaten me?"

"Oh, no!" said Athos, sadly, "and I have no more of defiance than of fear in my soul. God, of whom I speak to you, Sire, hears me speak. He knows that for the integrity, for the honor, of your crown, I would still pour forth all the blood left in my veins by twenty years of civil and foreign wars. I can assure you that I no more threaten the King than I threaten the man; but I say to you, you lose two faithful servants by killing faith in the father's heart and love in the son's. The one no longer believes in the royal word; the other no longer believes in the loyalty of man or the purity of woman. One is dead to respect, and the other to obedience. Adieu!"

Having spoken thus, Athos broke his sword across his knee, and slowly laying the two fragments on the floor, and saluting the King, who was choking with rage and shame, he withdrew from the cabinet.

Louis, with his head buried in his arms, spent some moments in recovering himself, then suddenly rising, he pulled the bell violently.

"Call M. d'Artagnan!" he said to the startled ushers.

CHAPTER XIX.

AFTER THE STORM.

OUR readers have doubtless already asked themselves how Athos, of whom they had heard nothing for so long a time, contrived to reach the King's palace at such a very opportune moment. Our pretension as a novelist being above all things to link events together by an almost fatal logic, we stand ready to answer that question without delay.

Porthos, faithful to his duties as a successful arranger of affairs of honor, had proceeded, upon leaving the Palais-Royal, to rejoin Raoul at the Minimes, in the forest of Vincennes, and had related to him, in its minutest details, his interview with M. de Saint-Aignan. He had wound up by saying that the King's summons to his favorite would probably cause only a momentary delay, and that upon leaving the King, Saint-Aignan would hasten to respond to Raoul's challenge.

But Raoul, less credulous than his old friend, had concluded from Porthos' recital that if Saint-Aignan went straight to the King, he would tell the King everything, and that the King would thereupon forbid Saint-Aignan to present himself on the field. He had, therefore, left Porthos to keep guard on the spot chosen for the encounter, on the unlikely chance that Saint-Aignan would appear, and he had especially charged Porthos not to remain on the ground more than an hour or so. To this last injunction, however, Porthos absolutely declined to accede, but installed himself at the Minimes, on the contrary, as if he proposed to take root there, and exacted from Raoul a promise that he would return to his own apartments after seeing his father, so that Porthos' lackey might be able to find him in case M. de Saint-Aignan came to the rendezvous.

Bragelonne had left Vincennes and proceeded at once to see his father, who had been in Paris for two days.

The count had already been informed of these events by a letter from D'Artagnan, when Raoul arrived; and after holding out his hand, and embracing him, he motioned to him to be seated.

"I know that you have come to me as we go to a friend, vicomte, when we are in sorrow and tears. Tell me what it is that brings you."

The young man bowed and began to tell his story. More than once in the course of his recital tears choked his utterance and a sob, strangled in his throat, checked the narration. But at last he ended it.

Athos probably already knew how matters stood, since, as we have said, D'Artagnan had written him, but being resolved to maintain to the end that calmness and serenity which formed the almost superhuman side of his character, he answered :

"Raoul, I believe nothing of all these rumors, I believe nothing of what you fear, although trustworthy persons have already spoken to me on this subject, because in my soul and conscience I hold it impossible that the King should thus have outraged a gentleman. I answer for the King and will bring you back a proof of what I assert."

Raoul, wavering like a drunken man between what he had seen with his own eyes, and his imperturbable faith in one who had never lied to him, bent low, and only answered :

"Go, then, M. le Comte ; I shall wait," and he seated himself, his head buried in his hands. Athos dressed and departed, to wait upon the King. What he did there is already known to our readers, who saw him as he went in and as he came out from that interview.

When he returned to his lodgings, Raoul, pale and gloomy, had not moved from this attitude of despair. But at the sound of the opening door, and his father's approaching steps, the young man raised his head. Athos stood beside him, pale and grave, with uncovered head. He gave his cloak and hat to the lackey and dismissed him, then seated himself at Raoul's side.

"Well, monsieur," asked the young man with a mournful shake of the head, "are you at last convinced?"

"I am, Raoul. The King loves Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"He owns it, then?"

"Absolutely."

"And she?"

"I have not seen her."

"No, but the King spoke to you about her. What did he say of her?"

"He said that she loves him."

"Oh, you see, you see, monsieur!" said the young man, with a despairing gesture.

"Raoul," resumed the count, "I said to the King, believe me, all that you could have said yourself, and I spoke, I trust, in respectful though in firm language."

"And what did you say to him, monsieur?"

"I said, Raoul, that all was ended between him and us; that you could no longer remain in his service. I said that I, for my part, should withdraw into retirement. It only remains for me now to learn one thing."

"What is that, monsieur?"

"What course you have resolved upon?"

"My course? Upon what subject?"

"In regard to your love and —"

"Go on, monsieur."

"And your vengeance. For I fear that you are thinking of avenging your wrongs."

"Oh, monsieur, as to my love — perhaps some day, later on, I shall succeed in tearing it from my heart. I hope to do so, with God's help, and the aid of your wise exhortations. As to vengeance, I thought of it only while under the influence of evil thoughts, for there was no one really guilty, upon whom I could avenge myself. I have therefore renounced all thought of revenge."

"Thus you no longer wish to seek a quarrel with M. de Saint-Aignan?"

"No, monsieur. The challenge has been sent; if M. de Saint-Aignan accepts it, I am ready; but if he does not pick up my glove I shall leave it where it fell."

"And La Vallière?"

"M. le Comte, you cannot seriously believe that I have any thought of avenging myself on a woman," replied Raoul, with a smile so full of sadness that it brought tears to the eyes of the man who had so often bowed beneath the load of his own and others' sorrows. He held out his hand to Raoul, who grasped it eagerly.

"You are persuaded, then, M. le Comte, that the evil is past remedy?" he asked.

Athos shook his head. "Poor boy," he murmured.

"You imagine that I still hope," said Raoul, "and therefore you pity me. Oh, that which tortures me most is the effort to despise, as I ought, her whom I have so loved. Would that I were in some measure guilty towards her! Then I could forgive her and be happy."

Athos gazed sadly at his son; these few words which Raoul had pronounced seemed to him to have come from his own heart.

At this moment a lackey entered to announce M. d'Artagnan. This name rang in very different fashion in the ears of Athos and of Raoul.

The musketeer entered with a vague smile upon his lips. Raoul stood still; Athos went forward to greet his friend, with an expression on his face which did not escape Bragelonne. D'Artagnan replied by a similar movement of the eyebrows, then approaching Raoul, and taking him by the hand, he said, addressing the father and son at once:

"Well, well. We are consoling our child, it seems."

"And you, who are always so kind," said Athos, "have come to aid me in this difficult task," and so speaking Athos pressed D'Artagnan's hand in both of his. It appeared to Raoul that this pressure had a meaning apart from the words.

"Yes," replied the musketeer, scratching his mustache with the hand which Athos left free. "Yes, I have come also —"

"You are welcome, M. le Chevalier, not for the consolation you bring, but for yourself. I am consoled," and he forced a smile sadder than any tears D'Artagnan had ever seen shed.

"That is good!" said D'Artagnan.

"Only," pursued Raoul, "you have arrived just as M. le Comte was about to give me some details of his interview with the King. You permit him to go on, do you not?" and the young man's eyes sought to read the depths of the musketeer's heart.

"His interview with the King?" exclaimed D'Artagnan, in so natural a tone that it was impossible to doubt his astonishment being genuine. "You have seen the King, then, Athos?"

Athos smiled. "Yes, I have seen him," he said.

"Ah, really! You were not aware of the count's visit to the King?" asked Raoul, partly reassured.

"Faith, no; not at all!"

"Ah, then I am less uneasy," said Raoul.

"Uneasy! On what grounds?" asked Athos.

"Monsieur, forgive me!" said Raoul, "but knowing your affection for me, I feared lest you had expressed too hotly to his Majesty my grief and indignation, and that the King —"

"And that the King?" repeated D'Artagnan. "Well, go on, Raoul."

"I must beg your pardon, too, M. d'Artagnan," said Raoul. "I trembled for an instant, I must own, lest you had come here, not as M. d'Artagnan, but as captain of the King's musketeers."

"You are mad, my poor Raoul!" cried D'Artagnan, with a burst of laughter, which to an observant ear might have rung a little false.

"So much the better," said Raoul.

"Yes, mad, and do you know what my advice to you would be?"

"Speak, monsieur; coming from you, the advice must be good."

"Very well, then. I advise you after your journey, after your visit to M. de Guiche, after your visit to Madame and that to Porthos, after your ride to Vincennes, — I would counsel you, I say, to take a little repose. Go and lie down, sleep a dozen hours, and on awaking take a long, hard ride on a good horse," and drawing Raoul to him, he embraced him as if he had been his own son. Athos did the same, only it was apparent that the father's kiss was tenderer and his clasp stronger than the friend's.

The young man gazed once more at both men, striving to read them with all the force of his intelligence, but the penetration of his glance was blunted by the laughing face of the musketeer, and the calm, mild expression of the Comte de la Fère.

"Where are you going, Raoul?" asked the latter, seeing that Bragelonne was preparing to go out.

"To my own apartments, monsieur," he replied in his sad, low voice.

"Then we shall find you there, vicomte, if we have anything to communicate?"

"Yes, monsieur. Do you anticipate having anything important to say to me?"

"How do I know?" said Athos.

"Yes, fresh consolations," said D'Artagnan, pushing Raoul gently towards the door. Raoul, perceiving such entire serenity in every movement of the two friends, left the count's room, occupied only with the feeling of his own sorrow. "Heaven be praised!" he said, "I need think only of myself;" and drawing his cloak about him, so as to hide his melancholy face from the passers-by, he sought his own lodging, as he had promised Athos.

The two friends had watched the young man depart with a similar sensation of pity, which each of them expressed after his own fashion.

"Poor Raoul!" murmured Athos, with a deep sigh.

"Poor Raoul!" exclaimed D'Artagnan, with a shrug of the shoulders.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE DEPTHS.

"Poor Raoul!" Athos had said. "Poor Raoul!" had said D'Artagnan. Pitied by two such men, Raoul must indeed have been most unhappy.

Thus when he found himself at last alone, leaving behind him the intrepid friend and the indulgent father, when he recalled the King's confession of a passion which robbed him of his beloved Louise de la Vallière, he felt his heart break within him, as each of us has felt it break once, over our first illusion shattered, our first love betrayed.

"All is over!" he murmured. "Nothing is left in life! Nothing to expect, nothing to hope for! Guiche has told me so, my father has told me the same, and so has D'Artagnan. All is then a dream in this world. That future which I have pursued these last ten years was a dream! The union of our hearts was but a dream! That life of love and happiness before us but a dream! Poor fool! to dream thus awake and openly, in face of friends and enemies alike, so that my friends might pity me and my enemies mock my griefs! and so my misfortune will become a glaring disgrace, a public scandal. By to-morrow I shall be pointed out by the finger of scorn!"

And in spite of the calmness which he had promised to his father and D'Artagnan, Raoul could not restrain some dark words of menace. "And yet," he went on, "if I were Wardes or if I had the combined suppleness and strength of M. d'Artagnan, I should laugh with my lips, and persuade other women that this false one, whom I have honored with my love, leaves me but one regret, that of having been fooled by her semblance of honor. Doubtless a few mockers would flatter the King at my expense, but I should lie in wait for these scoffers and soon chastise them. Men would learn to fear me,

and by the time I had laid three or four at my feet, women would adore me. Yes, that is one course to pursue, and the Comte de la Fère himself would not scorn it. Was he not put to the trial too in his early days, as I am now? Did he not choose excitement in place of love? He has often told me so. Why should not I exchange love for pleasure? He suffered as deeply as I — even more, it may be. The story of one man, then, is the story of all men, a trial, shorter or longer, more or less grievous.

“The voice of humanity is only one cry of pain. But what matters the sorrow of others to one who suffers? Does the open wound in another breast assuage the anguish of our own? or does the blood that is flowing beside us stanch ours? Can the universal misery lessen that of each individual? No, each one suffers for himself, fights his own battle, sheds his own tears.

“And moreover what has life been to me hitherto? A cold and sterile arena where I have fought for others always, never for myself, — now for a King, now for a woman! The King has betrayed me, the woman has scorned me. Oh, unhappy wretch that I am! — a woman! Cannot I make all women expiate the crime of that one? What would it require? — only to be without a heart, only to forget that one ever had a heart! to be strong against the weak; to lean upon others even till they break. What does it require to come to that? — only to be young, handsome, strong, valiant, rich. I am or I will be all of these.

“But honor — what, then, is honor? — a theory which each man interprets in his own way. My father tells me: ‘Honor is the respect we owe to others, and above all that which we owe to ourselves.’ But Guiche, Manicamp, or Saint-Aignan, above all, would say, ‘Honor consists in serving the pleasures and passions of one’s king.’ Such honor as that is easy and pays well. With such honor I can keep my place at court, become gentleman of the bed-chamber, have a fine regiment of my own; with honor such as that I can become a duke and peer of France.

“The stain which this woman has stamped upon me, this grief with which she has broken my heart — the heart of Raoul, her childhood’s friend — in no whit affects M. de Bragelonne, a good officer, a brave captain, who will cover himself with glory at the first encounter, and who will become a hun-

dred times greater than Mademoiselle de la Vallière, the King's mistress; for the King will never wed Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and the more he proclaims her his mistress, the more he will widen the band of shame with which he has encircled her brow, in guise of a crown; and in proportion as all learn to despise her as I despise her, I shall win glory for myself.

"Alas, alas! we walked together, she and I, during the brightest days of life, hand in hand, along the sweet and blossoming path of youth, and now we have come to a cross-road where she and I must part, each going our separate ways, and ever diverging more widely, and I must reach the end of that road alone, despairing, utterly crushed! oh, wretched man that I am!"

Raoul had reached this point in his sinister reflections when his foot paused mechanically on the threshold of his own dwelling. He had arrived there without seeing through what streets he had passed, or knowing how he had come. He pushed open the door in the same way, and climbed the stair. As in most of the houses of that period, the staircase and landings were dark. Raoul's lodgings were up one flight; he stopped on reaching them to ring his bell. Olivain appeared and took his cloak and sword. Raoul himself opened the door leading from the antechamber into a small salon, somewhat richly decorated for a young man's salon, and adorned with flowers by Olivain, who, knowing his master's tastes, had taken pains to gratify them without caring whether his master noticed this attention or not.

There was hanging in this room a portrait of La Vallière, which she herself had drawn and given to Raoul. It hung above a great easy-chair covered with dark-hued damask, and was the first object towards which Raoul directed his step, and towards which his eyes turned.

In this he followed his usual habit; for whenever he returned to his room it was always this portrait which first drew his gaze. This time as always he went straight to it, knelt upon the chair, and gazed up at it sadly.

He had crossed his arms upon his breast and raised his head slightly; his eyes were calm but partly veiled, and his lips curved in a bitter smile. He gazed long at the adored image; then all he had been saying to himself passed through his mind again; all that he had suffered again assailed his heart,

and after an interval of silence, "Oh, unhappy that I am!" he exclaimed once more.

Scarcely had he pronounced these words when he heard the sound of a sigh and a deep moan behind him. He turned hastily, and in a corner of the salon he beheld a woman standing, bowed and veiled, who had been hidden by the opening door as he entered. He advanced towards this figure, whose presence no one had announced to him, bowing and asking her name, when suddenly the bowed head was raised, the veil drawn aside, revealing the face, and the pale sad features.

Raoul recoiled as if he had seen a spectre. "Louise!" he cried in such despairing accents that it seemed as if no human voice could utter such a cry without breaking all the fibres of the heart.

CHAPTER XXI.

WOUND UPON WOUND.

MADemoiselle DE LA VALLIÈRE, for it was indeed she, took a step forward.

"Yes, Louise," she murmured.

But in that interval, brief as it was, Raoul had time to recover his self-possession.

"You, mademoiselle?" he said; then with an indefinable accent, "you here?" he added.

"Yes, Raoul," repeated the girl, "yes, I was waiting for you."

"Pardon me," he said, "when I came in I did not know —"

"Oh! I had begged Olivain not to tell you —"

She hesitated, and as Raoul did not hasten to answer her, there was silence for a moment between them; a silence in which could be heard the sound of their heart-beats, no longer in harmony, but throbbing with equal violence.

It was for Louise to speak, and she strove to do so. "I have something to say to you," she said; "it was absolutely necessary that I should see you — myself — alone. I did not shrink from a step which must remain a secret, for no one but yourself would understand it, M. de Bragelonne."

"In truth, mademoiselle," stammered Raoul, startled and breathless, "and even I, in spite of the good opinion you have of me, I must own —"

"Will you do me the kindness to be seated and to listen to me?" said Louise, interrupting him, with her gentlest voice.

Bragelonne looked at her for a moment, then shaking his head sadly, sat down, or rather fell, into a chair.

"Speak!" he said.

She cast a timid glance around her. This glance was a prayer, and implored secrecy far more effectually than her words of a moment before.

Raoul rose, and going to the door, called Olivain: "I am at home to no one," he said; then turning towards Louise, "that is what you wished, is it not?" he asked.

Nothing can describe the effect produced upon Louise by these words which seemed to say, "You see that I still understand you."

She passed her handkerchief over her eyes, then, after a moment's reflection:

"Raoul," she said, "do not turn your frank, kind eyes away from me; you are not one of those men who despise a woman because she has given her heart away, even by a love which causes them unhappiness, or wounds their pride."

Raoul made no answer.

"Alas!" proceeded La Vallière, "it is only too true; my cause is bad, and I scarce know how I shall begin. But I believe the best will be to relate to you simply what has befallen me. As I shall speak only the truth, I shall find my way straight through the darkness, the doubts, the obstacles I have to brave, in order that I may relieve my overflowing heart by pouring out all at your feet."

Raoul still kept silence.

La Vallière gazed at him with a look that seemed to say, "Encourage me! in pity's name, one word!"

But he was silent, and she was forced to go on.

"Just now M. de Saint-Aignan came to me from the King, and told me that you knew all," and so speaking she cast down her eyes, while Raoul turned away his face to avoid seeing her.

"M. de Saint-Aignan came to me, sent by the King," she repeated, "and he told me that you knew all!" And she tried to look in the face of him who was hearing this blow after so many others, but she found it impossible to meet Raoul's eyes. "He told me that you had conceived a just anger against me!"

This time Raoul looked at the girl, and a scornful smile curled his lip.

"Oh!" she went on, "I implore you, do not say that you felt toward me aught beside anger! Raoul, wait until I have told you all; wait until I have spoken to the end."

Raoul's brow cleared, through sheer force of will, and his lips relaxed their curve of disdain.

"And first of all," said La Vallière, with clasped hands and bowed head; "first of all, I implore pardon of you, — the most generous, the noblest of men. Though I have left you in ignorance of what was passing within my heart, yet I never meant to deceive you. Oh, I implore you, Raoul! I beg you on my knees, answer me — if it be only by reproaches! Better, far better a taunt from your lips than suspicion in your heart."

"I admire your subtlety, mademoiselle," said Raoul, with a desperate struggle to remain calm. "To leave another in ignorance that you are deceiving him is loyal, but to deceive him, it seems, is wrong, and that you would never do."

"Monsieur, for a long time I believed that I loved you above all, and so long as I believed in my love for you I told you that I loved you. At Blois I loved you. The King came to Blois. I thought that I loved you still. I would have sworn it before the altar, but a day came which undeceived me."

"Well, upon that day, mademoiselle, seeing I on my side loved you still, loyalty should have commanded you to tell me that you cared for me no longer."

"On that day, Raoul — the day when I read the very depths of my own heart — the day when I owned to myself that you did not fill all my thoughts — the day when I saw before me another future than that of your friend, your betrothed, your wife — on that day, Raoul, you, alas! were not beside me."

"You knew where I was to be found, mademoiselle. You should have written to me."

"Raoul, I dared not. I was a coward, Raoul! How could it be otherwise? I knew you so well. I knew how you loved me, and I trembled at the mere thought of the grief I should cause you. And this is so true, Raoul, that at this very moment as I speak, bowed before you, with a sinking heart, a voice full of sighs, eyes full of tears, with no shield but the

frankness with which I tell you all, my greatest sorrow is that which I read in your eyes."

Raoul tried to smile.

"No," went on the girl, with profound conviction, "you will not do me the wrong of disguising your true feelings before me now. You loved me. You were sure of your affection for me. You did not deceive yourself — did not lie to your own heart, while I — I —" and pale as death, flinging her arms above her head, she fell on her knees before him.

"While you," said Raoul, "told me that you loved me when you really loved another!"

"Alas, yes!" cried the poor child, "alas! I love another! and that other — oh, Heaven! let me tell you all, Raoul, it is my only excuse: I love that other better than my life — better than my own soul. Pardon my fault, Raoul, or punish my treason. I came here, not to defend myself, but to say to you: 'You know what it is to love. Well, I love! with a love such that I would give my life — nay, my soul — for him I love. If he should ever cease to love me, I shall die of grief, unless God comes to my aid, unless he has mercy on me.' Raoul, I am here to submit myself to your will, whatever it be — to die if it be your wish that I should die. Kill me, then, Raoul, if in your heart you think that I deserve death."

"Beware, mademoiselle," said Raoul, "the woman who invites death is the woman who has nothing but her heart's blood left to give to the lover she has betrayed."

"You are right," she said.

Raoul breathed a deep sigh. "And you love without being able to forget?" he cried.

"I love without wishing to forget, without wishing even to love another," replied La Vallière.

"It is well!" said Raoul, "you have said to me, in truth, all that you had to say, all that I could desire to know, and now, mademoiselle, it is my turn to ask pardon; it is I who have come near being an obstacle in your life; it is I who have been in the wrong, who by deceiving myself have helped to deceive you."

"Oh!" sighed La Vallière, "I do not ask so much from you, Raoul."

"I alone am to blame, mademoiselle," went on Raoul; "more experienced than you in the snares of life, I ought to have enlightened you; I ought never to have rested content with

uncertainties. I should have made your heart speak, whereas I hardly wrung an answer from your lips. I repeat, mademoiselle, I crave your forgiveness."

"It is impossible, impossible!" she cried, "you are mocking me."

"How impossible?"

"Yes, it is impossible to be so good, so generous, so noble as that!"

"Take care," said Raoul, with a bitter smile; "for you will perhaps tell me next that I did not love you."

"Oh! you loved me like the tenderest of brothers; let me believe that, Raoul."

"Like a brother? Undeceive yourself, Louise. I loved you like a lover, like a husband, as the tenderest of men could love."

"Raoul, Raoul!"

"Like a brother? Oh, Louise, I loved you so that I could have given my blood for you, drop by drop, my flesh, shred by shred, my eternity, hour by hour."

"Raoul, Raoul, have pity!"

"I loved you so, Louise, that my heart is dead, that my faith totters, that my eyes are dim. I loved you so that there is nothing left to me on earth or in heaven."

"Raoul, Raoul, my friend! I implore you, spare me!" cried La Vallière. "Oh, if I had but known—"

"It is too late, Louise; you love, you are happy; I read that happiness through your tears; behind your tears of loyalty, I hear your sighs of love. Louise, Louise, you who have made of me the most wretched of men, leave me, I implore you. Adieu! adieu!"

"Forgive me, I entreat you!"

"What! have I not done more than that? Have I not told you that I shall love you always?"

She hid her face in her hands.

"And to tell you that—do you understand, Louise?—to tell you that as I have told it you, to tell it at such a moment, is to speak my own death sentence. Adieu!"

La Vallière sought to stretch out her hands towards him.

"We must meet no more in this world," he said.

She strove to cry out; he laid his hand across her mouth. She pressed her lips to that hand, and fell insensible.

"Olivain," called Raoul, "lift this lady up, and carry her to her coach, which is waiting at the door."

Olivain raised her in his arms. Raoul made a movement towards La Vallière as if to clasp her in a first and last embrace; then stopping suddenly: "No," he cried, "this treasure is not mine. I am not the King of France, to steal another's!"

And he withdrew into his chamber, while the lackey bore away the still unconscious form of La Vallière.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHAT RAOUL HAD GUESSED.

As soon as Raoul had gone out, Athos and D'Artagnan, after the exclamation of pity which they had both uttered, found themselves alone, face to face. Athos at once resumed the eager expression he had worn upon D'Artagnan's first entrance. "Well, dear friend," he said, "what did you come to announce to me?"

"I?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Certainly, you! You are not sent to me thus without some reason." And Athos smiled.

"Upon my soul!" cried D'Artagnan.

"Come, I will put you at your ease, dear friend. The King is enraged, is he not?"

"Well, I must confess to you that he is not very well pleased."

"And you have come —"

"From him? Yes."

"To arrest me, then?"

"You have hit the mark, my friend."

"I was expecting it. Let us go."

"Oh, oh! the devil!" cried D'Artagnan. "What a hurry you are in!"

"I fear to delay you," said Athos, smiling.

"I have time enough. Are you not curious, moreover, to hear what passed between the King and me?"

"If it please you to relate it to me, dear friend, I will listen with pleasure," and he motioned D'Artagnan to a large arm-chair, in which the latter stretched himself out at ease.

“I care a great deal about it,” continued D’Artagnan, “because the conversation was a rather odd one.”

“I am listening.”

“Well, in the first place, the King summoned me.”

“Immediately on my departure?”

“You had hardly got to the foot of the staircase, so my musketeers told me. I entered, my friend. The King was not red in the face; he was purple. I knew nothing of what had taken place, only I saw upon the floor a sword, broken in two pieces.

“‘Captain d’Artagnan,’ cried the King, as soon as he saw me. ‘Sire,’ I answered. ‘I cast off M. de la Fère,’ he cried; ‘he is insolent.’ ‘Insolent?’ I exclaimed, in such a tone that the King stopped short. ‘Captain d’Artagnan,’ he resumed, between his set teeth, ‘you shall listen to me, and obey me.’ ‘Such is my duty, Sire.’ ‘I wished to spare this gentleman — of whom I have some pleasant memories — the affront of having him arrested here in my palace.’ ‘Ah, indeed!’ I rejoined, tranquilly. ‘But,’ he proceeded, ‘you will take a coach.’ At this I made a slight movement. ‘Or, if you feel reluctant to arrest him yourself, send me my captain of the guards.’

“‘Sire,’ I replied, ‘there is no occasion to call the captain of the guards, since I am on duty.’ ‘I do not wish to distress you,’ said the King, kindly; ‘you have always served me well, M. d’Artagnan.’ ‘There is nothing to distress me, Sire,’ I answered; ‘I am on duty, that is all.’ ‘But,’ replied the King, in amazement, ‘I thought the count was your friend.’ ‘If he were my own father, Sire, I am none the less on duty.’ The King gave me a scrutinizing look, but I kept an impassible countenance and he seemed satisfied. ‘You will then proceed to arrest M. le Comte de la Fère?’ he asked. ‘Certainly, Sire, if you order me to do so.’ ‘Very well, those are your orders.’ I bowed. ‘Where is the count, Sire?’ I said. ‘You must look for him.’ ‘I am to arrest him, then, wherever he may be?’ ‘Yes; however, try to manage it so that he shall be at home. In case he should be returning to his estate, follow him out of Paris and arrest him on the road.’ I bowed, and as I remained standing, ‘Well, what is it?’ asked the King. ‘I am waiting, Sire.’ ‘For what are you waiting?’ ‘For written orders.’ The King seemed annoyed, for indeed this was to commit another arbitrary act, to repeat his high-handed measure, if such it were. He accordingly took up the pen slowly, and in

a very bad temper, and wrote: 'This is an order to M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, lieutenant-captain of my musketeers, to arrest M. le Comte de la Fère, wherever he may find him.' Then he turned towards me as I stood without moving a muscle of my face. Doubtless he took my tranquillity for bravado, for he signed in haste, and handing me the order, 'Go!' he cried. I obeyed and here I am."

Athos pressed his friend's hand. "Let us be off!" he said.

"Oh!" replied D'Artagnan, "you must have some small affairs to settle before you leave your lodgings like this."

"I? not at all."

"How is that?"

"Why, forsooth! You know, D'Artagnan, that I have always been merely a traveller in this world, ready to start for the ends of the earth at the command of my King, ready to leave this world for another at the command of my God. What does a man require who is prepared for everything? — his portmanteau or his coffin. I am ready to-day as always, dear friend. Lead me away then."

"But Bragelonne?"

"I have brought him up in the same principles by which I am guided myself, and you must have noticed that the moment he saw you he guessed for what cause you had come. We put him off the track for a moment, but be sure, he expects my disgrace too fully to be alarmed beyond measure. Let us be going."

"Let us be going," returned D'Artagnan, quietly.

"My friend," said the count, "since I broke my sword in the King's presence and threw the fragments at his feet, I think that must excuse me from delivering it up to you."

"You are right, and besides, what the devil should I do with your sword?"

"Shall I walk before you or behind you?"

"You will walk arm in arm with me," replied D'Artagnan, and he took the Comte de la Fère's arm to descend the staircase; thus they reached the landing. Grimaud, whom they met in the antechamber, watched their departure with some anxiety. He knew the world too well not to suspect that some mystery was hidden beneath all this.

"Ah! it is you, my good Grimaud," said Athos. "We are going —"

“To take a ride in my coach,” interrupted D’Artagnan, with a friendly nod.

Grimaud thanked D’Artagnan by a grimace which was evidently intended for a smile, and waited upon the two friends to the door. Athos stepped into the carriage first, D’Artagnan followed, without giving any order to the coachman. Their departure had taken place so quietly that it created no sensation in the neighborhood.

When the coach had reached the quays Athos spoke. “You are taking me to the Bastille, I see.”

“I,” said D’Artagnan, “I am taking you wherever you wish to go; not elsewhere.”

“How is that?” cried the count, in surprise.

“*Pardieu!*” said D’Artagnan, “you understand perfectly, my dear count, that I only undertook this commission in order that you might act your pleasure. You did not expect me to throw you into prison brutally like that, without reflection. If I had anticipated that, I should have let the captain of the guards arrest you.”

“And so —” inquired Athos.

“And so, I repeat, we are going wherever you wish.”

“Dear friend,” said Athos, embracing D’Artagnan, “I recognize you in this!”

“On my faith! it seems to me simple enough. The coachman shall drive you to the barrier of Cours-la-Reine, you will find there a horse which I ordered to be in waiting for you. Mounted on that horse, you can ride three posts without stopping, and I on my side will not return to the King to tell him you are gone until it is too late to overtake you. During that time you will have reached Havre, and from Havre you will sail for England, where you will find the pretty house which my friend, M. Monk, presented to me, without counting the hospitality which will doubtless be offered you by King Charles. Well, what do you say to that plan?”

“Take me to the Bastille,” replied Athos, with a smile.

“Obstinate man!” cried D’Artagnan, “only reflect a little.”

“Upon what?”

“That you are no longer twenty years of age. Believe me, my friend, I speak of what I know. A prison is mortal to men of our years. No, no, I will not suffer you to languish in prison. The mere thought of it turns my head.”

“Friend,” replied Athos, “God has happily created me as

strong in body as in mind. I shall be strong, believe me, to my latest breath."

"But this is not strength, dear friend, it is folly."

"No, D'Artagnan, it is supreme good sense. Do not imagine that I am discussing with you, the least in the world, the question of whether you would ruin yourself by saving me. I would have done just what you have planned if flight had suited me. I would have accepted from you what, doubtless, under like conditions, you would have accepted from me. No, I know you too well even to touch upon that question."

"Ah! if you would let me have my way," cried D'Artagnan, "I would soon send the King running after you."

"He is king, dear friend."

"Oh! what do I care for that? King as he is, I should have said to him plainly: Sire, imprison, exile, put to death all France and all Europe; order me to arrest and to stab whom you will, if it were Monsieur, your brother, but do not touch a hair of the head of one of the four musketeers, or *mordieux!* —"

"Dear friend," replied Athos, calmly, "I should like to convince you of one thing; that is, that I wish to be arrested, that I desire an arrest beyond everything." D'Artagnan shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, what have you to say?" continued Athos. "So it is! Even were you to let me go free, I should return and deliver myself up. I wish to prove to this young man that the splendor of a crown has dazzled him; I wish to show him that he can be the greatest of men only by being the wisest and most generous. He imprisons me, he punishes me, he tortures me; so be it. He abuses his power and I will teach him what remorse is, while waiting until God teaches him what expiation is."

"Friend," replied D'Artagnan, "I know only too well that when you have once said 'no,' it is final. I insist no more; you wish, then, to go to the Bastille?"

"I wish it."

"Then let us go! To the Bastille," cried D'Artagnan to the coachman, and throwing himself back in the coach he began gnawing his mustache with a fury which showed Athos that he had taken, or was about to take, some desperate resolution. There was dead silence in the coach, which rolled

steadily along without increasing or relaxing its speed. Athos took the musketeer's hand in his.

"You are not angry with me, D'Artagnan?" he said.

"I? No, *pardieu*! What you are doing from heroism I should have done myself out of obstinacy."

"But you are convinced that God will avenge me, are you not, D'Artagnan?"

"And I know those upon earth who will aid God's work," replied the captain.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THREE GUESTS WHO ARE AMAZED AT SUPPING TOGETHER.

THE coach had now reached the outside gate of the Bastille. Here a sentry stopped it, but at a word from D'Artagnan they were allowed to pass. As they entered the wide covered way leading to the governor's court D'Artagnan, whose lynx eye saw everything, even through walls, suddenly cried out:

"Eh! what is that I see?"

"Well, what is it, friend?" returned Athos, calmly.

"Look out yonder!"

"In the court?"

"Yes, yes, make haste!"

"Well, I see a coach arriving, — doubtless some poor prisoner like myself whom they are bringing here."

"Oh, that would be too droll!"

"I do not understand you."

"Look again, quickly, and see if you can make out who it is that is getting out of the coach."

At that moment a second sentry had summoned D'Artagnan to stand, and while the formalities were being gone through with, Athos could observe at a hundred paces off the man whom his friend had pointed out to him.

"Well," asked D'Artagnan, "do you see him?"

"Yes, it is a man in a gray coat who is getting out of the carriage; that is all."

"Athos, I wager that it is he."

"He? Who?"

"Aramis."

"Aramis arrested? Impossible!"

"I do not say that he is under arrest, since we see that he is alone in his carriage."

"What is he doing here, then?"

"Oh! he is a friend of Baisemeaux, the governor," replied the musketeer, slyly. "On my faith, we have arrived in the nick of time."

"For what?"

"Oh! to see!"

"I regret this encounter exceedingly. Aramis on catching sight of me will be doubly annoyed: first, at seeing me here, secondly, at being seen."

"Well reasoned."

"Unhappily there is no help for it when you meet some one in the Bastille. Even if you wish to retreat to avoid him it is impossible."

"I tell you, Athos, that I have my idea. We must contrive to spare Aramis the annoyance you speak of."

"How can we do that?"

"Do as I tell you, or rather, let me manage the thing in my own fashion. I would not advise you to tell a falsehood; it would be quite impossible."

"What then?"

"Oh! I shall lie for two. It comes so easy to the Gascon nature."

Athos smiled. The carriage stopped at that moment where the one we have just pointed out had stopped, before the door of the governor's house.

"It is understood, then?" whispered D'Artagnan in his friend's ear. Athos made a motion of assent and they went up the stairs. If it seems astonishing that a party should enter the Bastille with such ease, let our readers remember that at the outside gate, which was the one most closely guarded, D'Artagnan had announced that he was bringing a prisoner of state. At the third gate, on the contrary, that is, once fairly in, he merely said: "To M. de Baisemeaux," and they both passed on. They were ushered into the dining hall of the governor, where the first face that met D'Artagnan's eye was that of Aramis, who was seated beside Baisemeaux, awaiting the arrival of a sumptuous repast, whose odor was already filling the apartment. If D'Artagnan assumed surprise, Aramis for his part did not have to assume it. He started on seeing his friends, and his emotion was visible.

Meanwhile Athos and D'Artagnan were paying their respects to the governor, who, amazed, staggered by the presence of three such guests, was making a host of evolutions around them.

"Well, how is this?" said Aramis. "By what chance—"

"That is what we would ask you," retorted D'Artagnan.

"Are we all giving ourselves up as prisoners?" cried Aramis, with affected hilarity.

"Ah, ah!" rejoined D'Artagnan. "It is true; these walls have a devilish aroma of the prison. You know, M. de Baisemeaux, that you invited me to sup with you the other day."

"I?" cried Baisemeaux.

"What's this? You seem to have fallen from the clouds. Have you forgotten all about it?"

Baisemeaux turned pale, then red; he looked at Aramis, who looked at him, and ended by stammering:

"Certainly—I am enchanted—but on my honor!—I do not—ah, my wretched memory!"

"It seems I have made a mistake, then," said D'Artagnan, in an offended tone.

"How, a mistake?"

"In recalling what you have forgotten."

"Oh, I beg of you not to take offence, my dear captain," he cried. "I am the poorest head in the kingdom. Take me away from my pigeons and this pigeon-house, and I am not worth as much as a six weeks' recruit."

"You do remember at last, then?" said D'Artagnan, coolly.

"Yes, yes," replied the governor, hesitating, "I remember."

"It was at the King's. You were telling me all manner of stories as to your business dealings with MM. Louvière and Tremblay."

"Yes, yes; I remember perfectly."

"And of M. d'Herblay's kindness to you."

"Ah!" cried Aramis, looking the unhappy governor straight in the eye. "You were just saying that you had no memory, M. Baisemeaux."

The latter cut the musketeer short.

"That is it; you are quite right. I recall it all as if I were still there. A hundred thousand pardons! But take note of this, dear M. d'Artagnan, now and at all times, invited or not, you are master here—you and M. d'Herblay, your friend," turning to Aramis, "and monsieur," with a bow to Athos.

"I knew how it would be," replied D'Artagnan. "This is how I happened to come : having nothing to do this evening at the Palais-Royal, I thought I would take pot luck with you, and on my way I met monsieur —"

Athos bowed.

"M. le Comte, who had just left the King, delivered me an order from him which requires prompt execution. We were close by here, so I kept on just to take you by the hand, and to present monsieur to you, of whom you were speaking in such flattering terms when I met you at the King's on the same evening when —"

"Very well! very well! M. le Comte de la Fère, I believe?"

"Precisely."

"M. le Comte is welcome."

"And he will dine with you two, shall he not? while I must keep on the track like the poor bloodhound I am. You others are lucky mortals," he added, sighing as noisily as Porthos might have done.

"So you are leaving us?" cried Aramis and Baisemeaux, with one voice, expressive of joyful surprise, the tone of which was not lost on D'Artagnan. "I leave you in my place," he went on, "an excellent and noble guest," and he struck Athos lightly on the shoulder. The latter also had evinced a little surprise, which fact was noticed by Aramis alone, M. de Baisemeaux not being as clever as our three friends.

"What! we are to lose you?" resumed the worthy governor.

"I must leave you for an hour or so. I will be back for dessert."

"Oh! we can wait for you," said Baisemeaux.

"Oh! no; that would annoy me extremely."

"You are really coming back?" asked Athos, in a tone of doubt.

"Most certainly," he replied with a confidential grasp of the hand, and he added in a lower tone :

"Wait for me, Athos; be as gay as possible, and above all things, do not talk of serious matters, for the love of Heaven!"

A renewed pressure of the hand enjoined on the count the need of impenetrable discretion.

Baisemeaux waited upon D'Artagnan to the door, while Aramis, with his most caressing manner, took possession of Athos, resolved to make him speak out; but Athos had all the virtues in a supreme degree. If necessity had required it,

he could have been the finest orator in the world, or if occasion demanded he could have died without a word upon his lips. The three gentlemen seated themselves ten minutes after D'Artagnan's departure at a table amply supplied with every gastronomic luxury. Huge joints, delicate preserves, a variety of choice wines, appeared successively on this board, served at the King's expense, and the cost of which M. Colbert could have reduced by two-thirds without causing any one in the Bastille to pine away. Baisemeaux was the only one of the trio who ate and drank resolutely. Aramis refused nothing and barely tasted anything. Athos, after the soup and the first course or two, declined everything. The conversation was what might be expected between three men of such opposite dispositions and prospects.

Aramis never ceased asking himself by what strange chance Athos was still Baisemeaux's guest, while D'Artagnan had departed, and why D'Artagnan was no longer there when Athos remained. Athos was sounding the depths of this mind of Aramis, nourished as it was upon intrigues and subterfuge; he looked well at his man and scented some new and important scheme. Then he concentrated his attention upon his own interests, and asked himself why D'Artagnan should have quitted the Bastille so hastily, leaving behind him a prisoner so badly introduced, and so badly guarded.

But it is not over these personages that we must now linger; we will abandon them to their own reflections over the remnants of fish, fowl, and game, carved by Baisemeaux's liberal knife; and we will set out upon the track of D'Artagnan, who, reëntering the coach which had brought him, cried in the coachman's ear, "To the King! and burn the pavement!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT WAS HAPPENING AT THE LOUVRE DURING THE SUPPER
IN THE BASTILLE.

M. DE SAINT-AIGNAN had executed the commission given him by the King to La Vallière, as we have seen in a preceding chapter ; but with all his eloquence he was not able to persuade the young girl that she had a sufficient protector in the King, and that she stood in need of no other friend on earth so long as his Majesty took her part.

In fact, upon the first word uttered by the confidant as to the discovery of the famous secret, Louise broke out into tears and sobs, and abandoned herself to an excess of grief which the King would not have found flattering to himself if he had chanced to be a witness of it. Saint-Aignan, his ambassador, resented it, as his master might have done, and returned at once to the King to announce what he had seen and heard. It is there that we now find him, greatly agitated, in presence of Louis, who was more agitated still.

"But," said the King to the courtier when the latter had finished his narration, "what has she decided ? Shall I at least have a glimpse of her before supper ? Will she come here, or must I go to her ?"

"I am persuaded, Sire, that if your Majesty desires to see her, you must not only take the first steps, but go the whole way."

"What, nothing for me ! She takes it greatly to heart about this Bragelonne, then ?" murmured Louis XIV., between his teeth.

"Oh ! Sire, that is not possible, for it is your Majesty whom Mademoiselle de la Vallière loves, and that with all her heart. But as you know, M. de Bragelonne belongs to that severe race who love to play the Roman hero."

The King smiled feebly. He knew what this meant only too well, for Athos had just left him.

"As to Mademoiselle de la Vallière," pursued Saint-Aignan, "she was brought up at the court of the dowager madame — that is to say, in retreat and obscurity. Those two lovers made frigid little vows to each other under the pale moon and stars, and you see, Sire, it is the very devil now to break off all that."

Saint-Aignan had fancied that he could still make the King laugh, but Louis' expression, on the contrary, changed from a half-smile to a look of deep seriousness. He was beginning to feel the stings of that remorse which the Comte de la Fère had predicted; he was reflecting that these two young people had in truth loved each other and had plighted their troth: that one of them had kept it faithfully, and that the other was too loyal at heart not to lament her perjury.

And together with remorse the pangs of jealousy were stabbing the King's heart, so that he uttered not a word, and instead of betaking himself as usual to the queen mother's apartments, or those of Madame, to amuse the ladies and laugh with them, he flung himself despondently into the great armchair in which his august father, Louis XIII., had been wont to bore himself for hours at a time, in company with Baradas and Cinq-Mars.

Saint-Aignan, perceiving that the King was not in a mood to be easily amused, tried his last resource by pronouncing Louise's name. The King raised his head.

"What does your Majesty propose to do this evening? Shall not Mademoiselle de la Vallière be informed?"

"On my life! it strikes me that she has been informed," replied the King.

"Will your Majesty take a walk?"

"We have just returned from walking."

"What shall we do, then, Sire?"

"Let us dream, Saint-Aignan, each on his own account. When Mademoiselle de la Vallière has given time enough to regrets" (here remorse was doing its work), "she will perhaps deign to communicate with us."

"Ah, Sire! can you thus misread that devoted heart?"

The King rose, crimson with vexation; jealousy was now devouring him in its turn. Saint-Aignan was beginning to find the situation beyond him, when suddenly the curtain of the door was drawn aside. The King started, his first thought being that a note had come to him from La Vallière; but in place of the messenger of love he saw only his captain of musketeers standing silent in the doorway.

"M. d'Artagnan!" he exclaimed; "well, what is it?"

D'Artagnan glanced at Saint-Aignan; the King's eyes followed the same direction as his captain's. These glances would have spoken plainly to any one, all the more to a courtier like

Saint-Aignan. He bowed and withdrew, leaving the King and D'Artagnan alone.

"Is it done?" asked the King.

"Yes, Sire," replied the captain of musketeers, in a solemn voice, "it is done!"

The King found no word in which to reply, but pride forbade him to leave matters thus. When a king has come to a decision, however unjust, he must prove to those who have seen him take it, and above all to himself, that he was perfectly justified in so doing. There is an infallible means of reaching this end, that is, by putting the victim in the wrong. Louis, the apt pupil of Mazarin and Anne of Austria, knew better than any prince has ever known it his trade of king; and he strove now to give evidence of it. After a moment's silence, during which he had been following the line of reflection we have indicated, he asked carelessly:

"What did the count have to say?"

"Nothing whatever, Sire."

"But he surely did not allow himself to be arrested without uttering a word."

"He said that he was expecting to be arrested, Sire."

The King raised his head proudly.

"I trust that M. le Comte de la Fère does not persevere in his rôle of rebel?"

"In the first place, Sire, what do you call a rebel?" asked the musketeer, quietly. "Is a man a rebel, in the eyes of the King, who not only lets himself be flung into the Bastille, but who actually resists those who are unwilling to conduct him there?"

"Who are unwilling to conduct him there?" cried the King. "What am I to understand by that, captain? Are you mad?"

"I think not, Sire."

"Yet you speak of people who were unwilling to arrest M. le Comte de la Fère?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Who are these people?"

"Those apparently to whom your Majesty gave the commission," replied the musketeer.

"But it was you to whom I gave the commission," cried the King.

"Yes, Sire, it was I."

"And you dare to tell me that in spite of my order it was your intention not to arrest the man who had insulted me?"

"That was absolutely my intention, Sire."

"Oh!"

"I even proposed to him to mount a horse which I had waiting for him at the Barrier of the Conférence."

"And for what purpose did you have a horse waiting there?"

"Sire, it was to enable M. le Comte de la Fère to reach Havre, and thence to sail for England."

"You would have betrayed me, then, monsieur?" cried the King, with a flash of ferocious pride.

"Precisely."

There was nothing to reply to utterances made in this tone. The King felt in them so rude a shock of resistance that he stood amazed.

"You must have had some reason at least, M. d'Artagnan, for acting thus?" demanded the King, with majesty.

"I have always a reason, Sire."

"You cannot at least found your resistance on the pretext of friendship, the only one which could have excused you, for I put you at your ease upon that chapter."

"How so, Sire?"

"Did I not give you free choice to arrest or not to arrest M. le Comte de la Fère?"

"Yes, Sire, but —"

"But what?" interrupted the King, impatiently.

"But warning me at the same time that if I did not arrest him, it would be done by your captain of the guards."

"Did I not make your course smooth enough for you, by not forcing your hand?"

"For me, Sire, yes, but not for my friend, since whether by me or by the captain of the guards, he would still be arrested."

"This, then, is your devotion, monsieur, a devotion which reasons, which chooses for itself. You are not a soldier, monsieur."

"I wait, then, for your Majesty to tell me what I am."

"Very well, then, you are a *Frondeur*."

"But since there is no longer a Fronde, Sire."

"If what you say is true —"

"What I say is always true, Sire."

"For what are you here? Speak!"

"I am here to say to your Majesty: 'Sire, M. le Comte de la Fère is in the Bastille.'"

"It is not due to you, it seems."

"That is true, Sire, but in short, he is there, and since that is the case, it is important that your Majesty should know it."

"Ah! M. d'Artagnan, you are defying your King."

"Sire —"

"M. d'Artagnan, I warn you that you are abusing my patience."

"On the contrary, Sire."

"How on the contrary?"

"I have come to have myself arrested, too."

"To have yourself arrested? you?"

"Doubtless. My friend will be very much bored yonder, and I have come to propose to your Majesty that you should permit me to keep him company. Let your Majesty speak the word, and I will arrest myself; I shall not need the captain of the guards for that, you may be sure."

The King sprang toward the table and seized a pen to write the order for D'Artagnan's imprisonment.

"Take notice that it is to be perpetual, monsieur," he cried in a tone of menace.

"I count upon it, Sire, for when once you have done that fine stroke, you will hardly venture to look me in the face again."

The King flung his pen away with violence.

"You may go, sir!" he said.

"Oh! not yet, Sire, if it please your Majesty. I came to speak gently to the King; the King has allowed himself to be carried away by wrath; that is unfortunate, but I shall none the less say to your Majesty what I had to say."

"Your resignation, monsieur! your resignation!"

"Sire, you know that I do not take my resignation much to heart, since at Blois, on the day when your Majesty refused King Charles II. the million, which my friend the Comte de la Fère gave him, I offered my resignation to your Majesty."

"Do so at once, then!"

"No, Sire, for it is not my resignation which is in question now. Your Majesty took up your pen to send me to the Bastille — why did you change your mind?"

"D'Artagnan! you Gascon braggart! Who is King here, you or I?"

"You, Sire, unluckily."

"How unluckily?"

"Yes, Sire, for if I were King —"

"If you were King, you would doubtless sanction M. d'Artagnan's rebellion, would you not?"

"Yes, doubtless, and I would say to my captain of musketeers," pursued D'Artagnan, "I would look at him with human eyes, not with flaming coals of fire, and I would say: 'M. d'Artagnan, I have forgotten that I was King, I have descended from my throne to insult a gentleman.'"

"Monsieur," cried the King, "do you think to excuse your friend by surpassing him in insolence?"

"Oh! Sire, I shall go much farther than he," said D'Artagnan, "and you will have only yourself to blame. I shall say to you what he, the most delicate of men, did not say. I shall say: 'Sire, you sacrificed his son, and he defended that son; you then sacrificed the father; he spoke to you in the name of honor, religion, and virtue, you spurned him, drove him from you, imprisoned him.' I shall be sterner than he and I shall say: 'Sire, choose! will you have friends or lackeys, soldiers or cringing fops, strong men or puppets? Do you wish men to serve you or to bend their necks before you? Do you wish them to love you or to fear you? If you prefer baseness, intrigue, cowardice, you have but to say so; we will leave you, we who are the sole remnants, I will say more, we who are the only models of the valor of an earlier day — we who have served, and surpassed, perhaps, in worth and courage, the great captains of the past. Make haste, Sire, and choose! Keep what is left to you of great nobles, you will always have enough courtiers. Make haste and send me to the Bastille with my friend; for if you could not listen to the Comte de la Fère, whose voice was the voice of gentleness and honor, if you cannot listen to D'Artagnan, who speaks with the rude, frank voice of sincerity, you are a bad king, and by to-morrow you will be a poor king. Now bad kings are abhorred, and poor kings are driven from their thrones.' That is what I had to say to you, Sire. You were wrong in driving me to it."

The King fell back cold and rigid in his chair; it was evident that a thunder-bolt, falling at his feet, could not have startled him more. That rude voice of sincerity, as D'Artagnan called it, had transfixed his heart like a sword-blade.

D'Artagnan had said all that he had to say. Understanding the wrath of the King, he drew his sword, and, approaching Louis XIV. with due respect, laid it upon the table before him. But the King, with a gesture of fury, pushed the sword from him, so that it fell to the floor, and rolled to D'Artagnan's feet.

Master of himself as the musketeer was, he turned livid in his turn, and boiling with indignation cried out: "A king may disgrace a soldier, he may exile him, he may sentence him to death, but were he a hundred times a king he has not the right to insult him by dishonoring his sword. Bethink you, Sire! This sullied blade can have no scabbard now except my heart or yours. I choose my own, Sire; thank God for it, and for my forbearance!"

Then rushing upon his sword: "My blood be upon your head, Sire!" he cried; and with a rapid movement he set the hilt to the ground, and directed the point towards his own breast. But the King dashed forward with a movement still swifter than D'Artagnan's, flinging his right arm around the musketeer's neck, while with the left he seized the blade of the sword in the middle, and slipped it silently back into the scabbard. D'Artagnan, stiff, pale, and still trembling with rage, let the King do all without a motion on his own part. Then Louis, deeply moved, stepped back to the table, took his pen, wrote several lines, signed them, and held out his hand to D'Artagnan.

"What is this paper, Sire?" said the captain.

"An order to M. d'Artagnan to release M. le Comte de la Fère on the spot."

D'Artagnan seized the royal hand and pressed it to his lips. Then he folded the order, slipped it under his coat of buff, and left the room. Neither King nor captain had uttered a syllable.

"Oh, human heart! compass for kings to steer by!" murmured Louis, left alone; "when shall I learn to read your secret folds like the pages of a book? No, I am not a bad king; no, I am not a poor king; but, alas! I am still a child."

CHAPTER XXV.

POLITICAL RIVALRY.

D'ARTAGNAN had promised M. de Baisemeaux to be back in time for dessert, and he kept his word. They were still sitting over the wine and the choice liquors, for which the governor's cellars were famous, when the spurs of the musketeer were heard clanking through the corridor, and he himself stood in the doorway.

Athos and Aramis had been playing a cautious game, and consequently neither had penetrated the other's play. They had supped, talked much of the Bastille, of the last journey to Fontainebleau, of M. Fouquet's approaching fête at Vaux. They had been prodigal of generalities, and no one but Baisemeaux had ventured to touch on particulars.

D'Artagnan dropped down upon them in the midst of the conversation, still pale and agitated from his interview with the King. Baisemeaux hastened to draw up another chair. D'Artagnan allowed his glass to be filled, and emptied it, both Athos and Aramis remarking meanwhile his emotion. As for Baisemeaux, he saw nothing save the captain of the King's musketeers, whom he was eager to entertain. Whoever approached the King had every claim upon M. de Baisemeaux's attention. But though Aramis had remarked D'Artagnan's agitation, he could not divine its cause. Athos alone thought he had fathomed it. For him D'Artagnan's return, and above all the perturbation of this usually unruffled personage, seemed to say plainly: 'I have just asked the King something which his Majesty has refused me.' Convinced that he was right, Athos rose from the table with a smile, and made a sign to D'Artagnan as if to remind him that they had something else to do beside supping together.

D'Artagnan understood, and replied by another sign. Aramis and Baisemeaux, observing this mute dialogue, gave a questioning glance. Athos thereupon took upon himself to give an explanation of what was taking place.

"The truth is, my friends," said the Comte de la Fère, with a smile, "that you, Aramis, have been taking supper with a state criminal, and you, M. de Baisemeaux, with your prisoner."

Baisemeaux uttered a cry of surprise and almost of joy. This excellent M. de Baisemeaux was vain of his fortress, quite apart from the profit he derived; the more prisoners he had the happier he was; the greater the rank of the prisoners the prouder he became.

As for Aramis, assuming an expression adapted to the occasion:

"Oh, my dear Athos!" he said, "forgive me, but in truth I almost suspected what had happened. Some prank on the part of Raoul and La Vallière, is it not?"

"Alas!" sighed Baisemeaux.

"And you," went on Aramis, "being the great noble that you are, and forgetting that there are only courtiers now, went straight to the King and told him your mind."

"You have guessed aright, my friend."

"Consequently," said Baisemeaux, trembling at the thought of having supped so familiarly with a man who was in disgrace with his Majesty, "consequently, M. le Comte —"

"Consequently, my dear governor," said Athos, "my friend M. d'Artagnan will hand you that paper which is peeping out from his buff, and which is doubtless nothing less than the order for my detention."

Baisemeaux held out his hand with the readiness of long habit. D'Artagnan thereupon drew from his breast two papers, one of which he handed to the governor. Baisemeaux unfolded the paper, and read beneath his breath, pausing at intervals to look up at Athos:

"*'Order to hold in confinement in my fortress in the Bastille' — very good — 'in my fortress of the Bastille — M. le Comte de la Fère.'* Oh! monsieur, what a painful honor it is for me to have you here!"

"You will have a patient prisoner, monsieur," said Athos, in his calm and gentle voice.

"And a prisoner who will not remain a month with you, my dear governor," said Aramis, while Baisemeaux, the order in his hand, was making an entry in his jail-book of the King's command.

"Not even a day, or, rather, not even a night," said D'Artagnan, exhibiting the King's second order, "for now, dear M. de Baisemeaux, you may proceed immediately to enter this order for setting the count at liberty."

"Ah!" exclaimed Aramis, "that is an excellent piece of

work which you have spared me, D'Artagnan ;” and he pressed the musketeer’s hand with meaning and that of Athos at the same time.

“What!” cried the latter in amazement, “the King has given me my liberty?”

“Read, my dear friend,” responded D'Artagnan.

Athos took the order and read it. “It is true,” he said.

“Are you sorry to have it so?” asked D'Artagnan.

“Oh, no! on the contrary. I wish the King no evil, and the greatest evil one can wish to kings is that they should commit an injustice. But you have had a hard struggle, I know. Oh! confess it, my friend!”

“I? Not at all,” said the musketeer, laughing; “the King does whatever I wish.”

Aramis looked at D'Artagnan and saw clearly that he was lying; but Baisemeaux saw nothing but D'Artagnan, so dazzled was he by the sight of a man who could make the King do whatever he wished.

“And the King exiles Athos?” asked Aramis.

“No, not precisely. The King did not fully explain himself on that subject; but it strikes me that the wisest thing the count can do, unless he is especially bent on thanking the King —”

“No, truly,” replied Athos with a smile.

“Well, I think, then, the wisest course for the count,” pursued D'Artagnan, “will be to retire to his château. However, my dear Athos, you have but to speak, ask what you wish; if one residence is more agreeable to you than another, I take upon myself to procure it for you.”

“No, thanks,” said Athos, “nothing will suit me better, dear friend, than to return to my solitude, under my great trees, on the banks of the Loire. If God is the supreme healer of the wounds of the soul, nature is his supreme remedy. So, monsieur,” continued Athos, turning to Baisemeaux, “I am free, then?”

“Yes, M. le Comte, I believe so, I hope so at least,” replied the governor, turning the papers over and over, “unless, indeed, M. d'Artagnan should have a third order.”

“No, dear M. de Baisemeaux. No,” said the musketeer, “you must hold to the second, and stop there.”

“Ah! M. le Comte,” said Baisemeaux, addressing Athos, “you little know what you have lost; I should have put you

on thirty livres rations with the generals. What am I saying? — at fifty livres, rather, with the princes, and you would have supped every night as you have this evening."

"Permit me, monsieur," said Athos, "to prefer my mediocrity." Then turning to D'Artagnan:

"Let us go, my friend," he said.

"Let us go," echoed D'Artagnan.

"Am I to have the delight," asked Athos, "of having your company?"

"As far as the gate only, *très cher*," replied D'Artagnan, "after which I shall say to you as I said to the King: 'I am on duty.'"

"And you, my dear Aramis," pursued Athos, smiling, "will you bear me company? La Fère is on the road to Vannes."

"I, my friend, have an appointment," rejoined the prelate, "and I cannot leave without endangering important affairs."

"Then, my dear friend," said Athos, "permit me to embrace you and take my departure. Many thanks for your good will, my dear M. de Baisemeaux, and above all for the specimen you have given me of the Bastille fare." Then having embraced Aramis, and pressed M. de Baisemeaux's hand, and having received the parting good wishes of both, Athos went his way with D'Artagnan.

While the dénouement of the scene at the Palais-Royal was thus taking place in the Bastille, let us relate what was going on at the lodgings of Athos and of Bragelonne.

Grimaud, as we have seen, had accompanied his master to Paris, and had been present when Athos quitted his apartment; he had seen D'Artagnan gnawing his mustache while his master got into the coach, he had studied both their faces, and he had known them both long enough to be sure, in spite of their impenetrable masks, that events of a serious nature were taking place.

Once Athos had gone he set himself to reflecting; he then recalled the strange fashion in which Athos had taken leave of him, the embarrassment, imperceptible to all but himself, which he had detected in his master, usually so clear of mind and firm of purpose. He knew that Athos had carried nothing away, save what he had upon him, and yet he felt convinced that Athos' absence was not to be that of an hour or even of a

day. Something had spoken of a prolonged absence in the tone with which Athos had bidden Grimaud adieu.

All this recurred to his mind, with his sentiment of deep affection for Athos, and with that horror of emptiness and solitude which is apt to haunt the imagination, and rendered honest Grimaud very sad and above all very anxious. Without being fully conscious of what he was about, he wandered over the apartment, seeking, as it were, for traces of his master, like the faithful dog, who, though he cannot feel anxiety, yet feels lonely without his absent master. Only as Grimaud joined to the animal's instinct his human reason, he experienced loneliness and anxiety at once.

Finding no trace of any kind which could confirm or relieve his doubts, Grimaud set about *imagining* what might have happened. Now, imagination is the resource, or rather the torment, of faithful hearts. Indeed, a truly devoted heart never imagines its friend as perfectly cheerful and happy. Never does the wandering pigeon inspire anything but terror in the pigeon that is left at home.

Grimaud the faithful passed thus from anxiety to terror. He recapitulated to himself all that had happened : first, D'Artagnan's letter to Athos, upon the receipt of which Athos had seemed so greatly disturbed ; then Raoul's visit to Athos, in consequence of which Athos had called for his court dress and his orders ; then the visit to the King, from which Athos had returned in such a gloomy frame of mind ; next that explanation between the father and son, after which Athos had embraced Raoul so sadly, while Raoul had as sadly returned to his lodgings ; finally, the arrival of D'Artagnan, gnawing his mustache, after which M. le Comte de la Fère had ridden away in the coach with D'Artagnan. All this comprised a drama in five acts, perfectly intelligible to so shrewd an analyst as Grimaud. Therefore Grimaud had recourse at once to heroic measures. He searched in the doublet which his master had left behind, and discovered M. d'Artagnan's letter. This is what it contained :

“ DEAR FRIEND : Raoul has been here to ask me for information in regard to Mademoiselle de la Vallière's conduct during our young friend's sojourn in England. I am only a poor captain of musketeers, whose ears are filled all day long with the gossip of the barracks and the ruelles. If I had told

Raoul all that I believe I know, the poor boy would have died of it ; but since I am engaged in the King's service I cannot prattle of the King's affairs. If your heart moves you to speak, now is the time. The matter concerns you more than me, and well-nigh as much as it concerns Raoul."

Grimaud tore out a handful of his hair. He would have done better if his locks had been more abundant. "There," he said, "is the key to this enigma. This young girl has been playing pranks. What they say of her and the King is true ; our young master has been deceived, and he ought to know it. M. le Comte went to see the King, and told him his mind, and then the King sent M. d'Artagnan to arrange the business. Oh, Lord!" continued Grimaud, "M. le Comte came back without his sword."

This discovery brought out a cold sweat on the worthy man's forehead. He did not linger to frame further conjectures, but pulled his hat over his eyes and ran to Raoul's lodgings.

After Louise's departure Raoul had mastered his grief, and was driven to look ahead along this perilous road where his folly and rebellion were dragging him. He saw at the first glance his father forced into direct opposition to the King, since Athos had been the first to expose himself to this danger. In this moment of sudden lucidity the unhappy young man recalled the mysterious signals made by Athos, and D'Artagnan's unexpected visit ; and the inevitable result of such a conflict between prince and subject rose before his startled eyes.

D'Artagnan while on duty, that is to say, nailed to his post, did not certainly come to see Athos for the mere pleasure of making him a visit. He came to tell him something of importance ; this something was doubtless, in such a painful conjuncture, either a danger or a misfortune. Raoul shuddered at the thought of his own egotism, of his having forgotten his father in his love, — of his having, in a word, lost himself in his dreams and his luxury of grief, while he ought, perhaps, to have been repelling an imminent attack against Athos' safety. This thought made him spring to his feet. He girded on his sword and hastened at once to his father's dwelling ; on the way he ran against Grimaud, who, starting from the opposite pole, was dashing out with the same ardor to discover the truth. These two fell into each other's arms ; they had

reached the same point in the parabola described by their imagination.

"Grimaud!" cried Raoul.

"M. Raoul!" cried Grimaud.

"Is M. le Comte well?"

"You have not seen him?"

"No, where is he?"

"I am looking for him."

"And M. d'Artagnan?"

"He went out with him."

"When?"

"Ten minutes after you left us."

"How did they go?"

"In a coach."

"Where did they go?"

"I do not know."

"Did my father take money with him?"

"No."

"His sword?"

"No."

"Grimaud!"

"M. Raoul!"

"I have an idea that M. d'Artagnan came to —"

"To arrest M. le Comte, you would say?"

"Yes, Grimaud."

"I could have sworn it!"

"What road did they take?"

"By the quays."

"Towards the Bastille?"

"Oh, Lord, yes."

"Quick, let us run after them!"

"Yes, let us run."

"But where shall we go?" said Raoul, with sudden dejection.

"Let us go first to M. d'Artagnan's; we shall perhaps learn something there."

"No, since they concealed this thing from me at my father's, they will conceal it everywhere. Let us go to — oh, Heavens! I must be out of my senses to-day, my good Grimaud."

"How so?"

"I forgot M. du Vallon."

"M. Porthos?"

"Who is still waiting for me! Alas, as I told you, I am losing my mind."

"Waiting for you? Where?"

"At the Minimes, at Vincennes."

"Good Lord! Luckily it is in the same direction as the Bastille."

"Let us hasten, then!"

"Monsieur, I will go and get the horses saddled."

"Yes, my friend, go."

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN WHICH PORTHOS IS CONVINCED WITHOUT HAVING UNDERSTOOD.

THE worthy Porthos, faithful to all the laws of ancient chivalry, had decided to wait for M. de Saint-Aignan until sunset; and since M. de Saint-Aignan did not appear, since Raoul had forgotten to give notice to his second, since Porthos' guard duty began to grow excessively long and tiresome, he ordered one of the wardens of the gate to bring him some bottles of good wine and a slice of meat, in order that he might, at least, have the diversion of drawing a cork from time to time and eating a mouthful. He had arrived at the last extremity, that is to say, at the last bite, when Raoul arrived, attended by Grimaud and both riding at full gallop.

When Porthos espied upon the road these two riders in such hot haste he did not doubt that these were his men at last, and rising from the grass, where he was comfortably seated, he began to limber out his wrists and his knees, saying to himself as he did so:

"What a fine thing it is to have good habits! The fellow has come at last; and if I had gone away, and he had found no one here, he would have taken advantage."

Then he planted himself in a martial attitude, with his hand on his thigh, throwing out his broad chest, and displaying his gigantic height. But instead of Saint-Aignan he saw only Raoul, who hailed him with frantic gestures, crying:

"Pardon me, dear friend! Oh, pardon me! I have been desperate!"

"Raoul," cried Porthos, in amazement.

"You are angry with me?"

"I? And for what reason?"

"For having forgotten you thus; but, you see, I quite lost my head."

"Pshaw! You don't mean it!"

"If you only knew, my friend!"

"You have killed him?"

"Killed whom?"

"Saint-Aignan, of course."

"Oh, it matters little about Saint-Aignan."

"What has happened now?"

"This has happened: that the Comte de la Fère is probably under arrest at this moment."

Porthos gave a start violent enough to throw down a wall.

"Arrested? By whom?"

"By D'Artagnan!"

"It is impossible," said Porthos.

"It is true, nevertheless," replied Raoul.

Porthos turned towards Grimaud as one who requires further confirmation. Grimaud gave a nod.

"And where have they taken him?" demanded Porthos.

"Probably to the Bastille."

"What makes you think so?"

"We have questioned people along the road who saw the coach drive by, and others who saw it enter the court of the Bastille."

"Oh, oh!" muttered Porthos, and he took a step forward.

"What have you decided upon?" asked Raoul.

"I? Nothing, only I do not choose to have Athos stay in the Bastille."

Raoul drew nearer to the worthy Porthos.

"Do you understand that it is by order of the King he has been arrested?"

Porthos looked at the young man as if to say, "What does that matter to me?" This mute language seemed so eloquent to Raoul that he asked for nothing more. He remounted his horse, while Porthos, assisted by Grimaud, was doing the same.

"Let us draw up our plan of action," said Raoul.

"Yes, that is it," replied Porthos, "let us draw up a plan."

Raoul gave a deep sigh, and suddenly came to a halt.

"What ails you?" asked Porthos; "a sudden faintness?"

"No; our powerlessness! Do we propose, we three, to take the Bastille by storm?"

"Well, if D'Artagnan were only here," replied Porthos, "I do not see why not."

Raoul was seized with admiration at sight of this confidence, so heroic in its simplicity. These were indeed that famous band who by twos or threes had faced armies and stormed fortresses! These were they who had defied death, and who, surviving a generation in ruins, were still stronger than the most robust among the younger men.

"Monsieur," he said to Porthos, "you have given me an idea; we must certainly find D'Artagnan."

"Without a doubt."

"He must have returned to his quarters, after conducting my father to the Bastille."

"Let us first inquire at the Bastille," said Grimaud, who spoke seldom, but to the purpose.

They accordingly hastened to reach the fortress. By one of those strokes of luck which Heaven grants to men of resolute will, Grimaud suddenly caught sight of the coach just crossing the drawbridge at the main gate. It was at the very moment when D'Artagnan, as we have seen, was returning from the King's.

In vain did Raoul spur his horse to overtake the coach and see who was inside it. The horses had already drawn up inside the great gate, which was closed behind them, while one of the sentries on guard drove his musket against the nose of Raoul's horse. Raoul faced sharply about, thankful to have discovered at least the whereabouts of the coach which had brought his father.

"We have him," said Grimaud.

"If we wait awhile we are sure that he will come out, are we not, friends?"

"Unless D'Artagnan is a prisoner too," replied Porthos; "in that case all is lost."

Raoul made no answer; anything was possible. He advised Grimaud to lead the horses into the narrow street of Jean-Beausire, in order not to arouse suspicion, while he, with his piercing sight, would keep watch for D'Artagnan's reappearance or for that of the coach.

It was a wise move; twenty minutes had, in fact, hardly

passed when the gate was reopened and the carriage appeared. A sudden dizziness prevented Raoul from distinguishing who were inside, but Grimaud swore that he had seen two persons, and that his master was one of them. Porthos looked first at Raoul, then at Grimaud, trying to grasp their idea.

"It is evident," said Grimaud, "that if M. le Comte is in that coach it is because he has been set at liberty, or else that they are taking him to some other prison."

"We shall see that by the road it takes," said Porthos.

"If he is at liberty, they will drive him home," continued Grimaud.

"That is true," assented Porthos.

"The carriage is not taking that road," said Raoul, and in fact the horses had disappeared into the Faubourg Saint-Antoine.

"Let us run after them," cried Porthos; "we can attack the carriage on the road, and call to Athos to fly."

"Rebellion!" murmured Raoul.

Porthos threw a second glance at Raoul worthy of the first, to which Raoul only replied by digging his spurs into his horse. A few minutes later the three horsemen had overtaken the coach, and were following it so closely that their horses' breaths made a steam upon it.

D'Artagnan, whose senses were always on the alert, caught the sound of their hoofs. It was at the moment when Raoul was telling Porthos to ride past the carriage in order to see who it was who accompanied Athos. Porthos obeyed, but he could discover nothing, as the curtains were down. Impatience and anger were gaining upon Raoul. He began to remark this mystery kept up by Athos' companions, and he resolved to come to extremities.

On the other hand, D'Artagnan had recognized Porthos at once; he had also made out Raoul beneath the leather curtains, and he had communicated to the count the result of his observations. They both wished to see how far Raoul and Porthos would carry matters.

They were not disappointed. Raoul, pistol in hand, fell upon the forward horse, and commanded the coachman to stand. In the meantime Porthos had seized the man in his arms and lifted him off the box. Grimaud was already holding open the door of the coach.

Raoul threw out his arms, crying:

"M. le Comte ! M. le Comte !"

"Well, well, is that you, Raoul ?" cried Athos, drunk with joy.

"Not bad !" added D'Artagnan, with a burst of laughter ; and both embraced the young man and Porthos, who had seized hold of them.

"My good Porthos, excellent friend !" cried Athos. "It is always you !"

"He is still twenty years old," said D'Artagnan. "Bravo, Porthos !"

"Upon my word !" replied Porthos, in some confusion, "we thought they were arresting you."

"While in fact," returned Athos, "I was merely taking a drive in the coach with M. d'Artagnan."

"We have followed you from the Bastille," said Raoul, in a tone of suspicion and reproach.

"Yes, we had been to supper with that worthy M. de Baise-meaux. You remember Baisemeaux, Porthos ?"

"*Pardieu !* I should think so."

"And we found Aramis there."

"In the Bastille ?"

"Oh ! at supper."

"Ah !" cried Porthos, drawing a long breath.

"He sent you a thousand messages."

"Thanks !"

"Where is M. le Comte going ?" asked Grimaud, whom his master had already rewarded by a smile.

"We are going home to Blois."

"Just as we are ? — at once ?"

"At once."

"Without baggage ?"

"Oh, as to that, I thought to charge Raoul with sending mine after me, or bringing it with him if he returns home."

"If there is nothing to detain you longer in Paris," said D'Artagnan, with a look clear and piercing as steel, and as sharp as a sword-thrust, for it reopened the young man's wounds, "he would do well to follow you, Athos."

"I have nothing to keep me in Paris," said Raoul.

"We will go together, then," said Athos at once.

"And M. d'Artagnan ?"

"Oh ! as for me, I was only going with Athos as far as the Barriers, and I will return with Porthos."

"Come, my son!" added the count, throwing his arm tenderly around Raoul's neck to draw him into the carriage; and still holding him in a close embrace, the count pursued: "Grimaud, you can return quietly to Paris with your horse and M. du Vallon's; for Raoul and I will mount our horses here and leave the coach for these two gentlemen to return to Paris in; when you reach my lodgings you can pack up my clothes and papers and send them after us."

"But when you come back to Paris," said Raoul, trying to draw the count out, "you will find neither your linen nor your effects awaiting you and that may cause you inconvenience."

"I think, Raoul, that it will be a long time hence before I revisit Paris. Our last stay here has not encouraged me to come again."

Raoul bent his head and made no reply. Athos then got out of the carriage and mounted the horse which Porthos had ridden and which seemed very thankful to exchange riders. They all embraced and interchanged many assurances of eternal friendship. Porthos promised to spend a month with Athos in his next leisure. D'Artagnan agreed to make the same use of his first leave of absence; then having embraced Raoul once more, he said to him:

"My son, I will write to you."

These words meant everything, coming from D'Artagnan, who never wrote, and Raoul was moved to tears. He snatched his hands from the musketeer's grasp and rode away.

D'Artagnan rejoined Porthos in the coach.

"Well, dear friend," he said, "this has been a day indeed."

"So it has," replied Porthos.

"Your back must be well-nigh broken."

"Oh! not quite. I shall go to bed early to-night, however, in order to be ready for to-morrow."

"Ready for what?"

"*Pardieu!* to finish what I have begun."

"You make me shudder, friend. You look ferocious. What the devil have you begun that you have not finished?"

"Listen, then! Raoul did not fight his duel, so I must fight it for him!"

"What, with the King?" cried D'Artagnan, stupefied.

"How do you mean, with the King?"

"Certainly, you great baby. With the King!"

"I assure you that the quarrel is with M. de Saint-Aignan."

"That is what I meant. In fighting with that gentleman, you will be drawing your sword against the King."

"Ah, indeed!" cried Porthos, opening his eyes in amazement. "You are sure?"

"*Pardieu!*"

"Well, how shall we settle it, then?"

"We will begin by a good supper, Porthos; the captain of musketeers sets an excellent table. You will see Saint-Aignan's good side at supper, and you will drink his health!"

"I?" cried Porthos, in horror.

"What! you refuse to drink to the health of the King?"

"*Corbœuf!* I am not talking of the King. I am talking of M. de Saint-Aignan."

"But I keep repeating to you that it is all one."

"Ah! very well, then," said Porthos, relenting.

"You understand, do you not?"

"No, but that does not matter."

"No, it does not matter," replied D'Artagnan, "let us go to supper, Porthos."

CHAPTER XXVII.

M. DE BAISEMEAUX'S SOCIETY.

THE reader doubtless remembers that on leaving the Bastille, D'Artagnan and the Comte de la Fère left Aramis there, *tête-à-tête* with Baisemeaux. The latter did not perceive, in the least, that on the departure of these guests the conversation had languished. He knew that the Bastille wines were excellent, and he was of the opinion that good wine at dessert was a sufficient stimulus to make a good fellow talkative. But he did not know his Grace, who was never more impenetrable than at dessert. His Grace, however, knew M. de Baisemeaux through and through, and counted upon drawing him out by the very means which the governor regarded as so efficacious. The conversation, therefore, without languishing in appearance, did so in reality, for Baisemeaux not only kept it up almost alone, but could talk of nothing besides the singular circumstance of Athos' incarceration, followed so promptly by the order to set him at liberty. Baisemeaux had also observed that both orders — that for the arrest and that for the release —

were in the King's own hand. Now, the King did not trouble himself to write such orders himself, except in the most important cases. All this was very interesting, and above all very obscure to Baisemeaux, but since it was all perfectly clear to Aramis, he naturally did not attach the same importance to it as did the good governor.

Besides, Aramis rarely went out of his way for nothing, and he had not yet disclosed to M. de Baisemeaux for what cause he had taken this trouble now. So at the moment when Baisemeaux was in the midst of his dissertation, Aramis suddenly interrupted him.

"Tell me, dear M. de Baisemeaux," he said, "why you never have any other amusements at the Bastille than those in which I have shared during the two or three visits I have had the honor of paying you."

This apostrophe was so unlooked-for that the governor stopped in bewilderment like a weathercock that has suddenly received an impulsion contrary to that of the wind.

"Amusements?" he said. "Why, I have them continually, monseigneur."

"Indeed, I am glad to hear it. What are they?"

"Of all sorts."

"Visits, without doubt."

"Visits? Oh, no, visitors are not frequent at the Bastille."

"What! visits are rare, you say?"

"Very rare."

"Even from your society?"

"What do you call my society? — my prisoners?"

"Oh, no; your prisoners! I know that it is you who visit them, instead of their visiting you. I mean by your society, my dear De Baisemeaux, the society to which you belong."

Baisemeaux gazed fixedly at Aramis; then, as if what he had suspected for an instant seemed to him impossible: "Oh!" he said, "I have very little society at present. I must admit to you, dear M. d'Herblay, that the Bastille, as a dwelling, seems to strike outsiders in general as a trifle unso-ciable and tedious. As for the ladies, they never come to see me without exhibiting a certain alarm, which I have all the trouble in the world in quieting. In fact, why should they not tremble a little, poor women, on seeing these melancholy dungeons, and thinking that they are inhabited by poor prisoners who —" and the longer Baisemeaux's eyes remained

fixed upon Aramis' face, the more confused did the poor governor's tongue become, until it ended by being totally paralyzed.

"No, you do not understand me, my dear M. de Baisemeaux; you do not understand. I am not speaking of society in general, but of a particular society — of the society, in short, with which you are affiliated."

Baisemeaux almost let fall the glass of muscatel which he was raising to his lips.

"Affiliated?" he said; "affiliated?"

"Without doubt, affiliated," repeated Aramis, with the greatest nonchalance. "Are you not a member of a secret society, my dear M. de Baisemeaux?"

"Secret?"

"Secret or mysterious."

"Oh, M. d'Herblay —"

"Only look! You do not deny it."

"But believe me —"

"I believe what I know."

"I swear to you!"

"Listen to me, my dear M. de Baisemeaux. I say, yes; you say, no. One of us is undoubtedly right, and the other inevitably in error."

"Very well!"

"Very well. We will at once find out where we stand."

"Let us see!" said Baisemeaux; "let us see!"

"Drink your glass of muscatel, then, dear M. de Baisemeaux," said Aramis. "The devil! You look really terrified."

"Not at all. No, not the least — the least in the world."

"Drink, then."

Baisemeaux drank, but nearly strangled in doing so.

"Well," resumed Aramis, "if you do not belong to some sort of secret, mysterious society, — the name does not matter, — if, I say, you are not a member of some such society, you will not comprehend a word of what I am about to say; that is all."

"Oh! you may be sure beforehand that I shall not understand a word of it."

"So much the better."

"Come, try me!"

"That is what I am going to do. If, on the other hand,

you are one of the members of this society, you will answer at once 'yes' or 'no.'"

"Ask the question," said Baisemeaux, trembling.

"For you will acknowledge, dear M. Baisemeaux," pursued Aramis, with the same imperturbable manner, "that no man can belong to a society and enjoy the advantages which that society affords its members without himself incurring certain small obligations?"

"In fact," stammered Baisemeaux, "that would be possible if —"

"Very well, then," resumed Aramis, "there is in the society of which I was speaking to you, and to which it appears you do not belong —"

"Excuse me," said Baisemeaux, "I should not wish to assert absolutely —"

"There is an engagement entered into by all governors and captains of fortresses belonging to the order."

Baisemeaux turned pale.

"This engagement," went on Aramis, in a firm voice, "is this —"

Baisemeaux rose, a prey to uncontrollable emotion.

"Well, dear M. d'Herblay, let us hear."

Aramis then spoke, or rather recited, the following paragraph as if he had been reading it out of a book :

"The said captain or governor of a fortress will, upon the demand of a prisoner, and in case of need, permit the entrance of a confessor affiliated to this order."

He paused. Baisemeaux had turned so pale, and was trembling to such a degree, that it was painful to behold.

"Is not that the text of the agreement?" asked Aramis, quietly.

"Monseigneur!" said Baisemeaux.

"Ah, well! you begin to understand at last, I see."

"Monseigneur," cried Baisemeaux, "do not make sport of my poor brain like this. I feel that I am weak beside you if you take a malicious joy in drawing out from me the small secrets of my administration."

"Oh, not at all! Do not deceive yourself, dear M. de Baisemeaux; it is not the small secrets of your administration I am seeking to fathom, but those of your conscience."

"Well, so be it! of my conscience, dear M. d'Herblay. But I beg you to have some consideration for my position, which is not an ordinary one."

"It is not an ordinary position, my dear monsieur," pursued the inflexible Aramis, "if you are indeed a member of this society, but it is perfectly simple, if, being free from every pledge, you have only to answer to the King."

"Well, monsieur, well. I obey no one but the King. Good Heavens! whom would you have a French gentleman obey if not the King?"

Aramis yielded not a jot, but pursued in his softest tones:

"It is most pleasing to a French gentleman, to a prelate of France, my dear monsieur, to hear a man of your merit express himself with such entire loyalty, and having heard you to believe only in you."

"Have you ever doubted me, monsieur?"

"I? Oh, no."

"You certainly doubt me no longer?"

"I do not doubt, monsieur, that a man like you will serve faithfully the masters whom he has voluntarily chosen."

"The masters?" cried Baisemeaux.

"I said 'the masters.'"

"M. d'Herblay, you are still jesting, are you not?"

"Yes, I understand perfectly that it is a more difficult situation to have several masters than to have but one; but this embarrassment you owe to yourself, dear M. de Baisemeaux, and I am not responsible for it."

"No, certainly not," replied the poor governor, more embarrassed than ever; "but what are you doing? You are rising to leave."

"Certainly."

"You are going?"

"I am going. Yes."

"But your manner towards me is very strange, monseigneur!"

"What! I, strange? In what way?"

"Come! have you sworn to put me to the torture?"

"No, I should be in despair at doing so."

"Then stay."

"I cannot stay."

"Why so?"

"Because I have nothing further to do here, while on the other hand, I have duties elsewhere."

"Duties, at this late hour?"

"Yes. Understand me, dear M. de Baisemeaux. They said to me, who sent me here: 'The said governor or captain

will, in case of need, and on the demand of the prisoner, permit the entrance of a confessor affiliated to the order.' I came accordingly. I find that you do not understand what I am saying. I must therefore return to those who sent me and inform them that they are mistaken and that they must send me elsewhere."

"What! You are —" cried Baisemeaux, gazing at Aramis, with something approaching terror.

"The confessor affiliated to the order," said Aramis, without the slightest change of tone.

But mild as were these words, they were like a thunder-bolt to the poor governor. He turned livid, and it seemed to him as if Aramis' fine eyes were two fiery blades piercing his very heart.

"The confessor!" he muttered, "you, monseigneur, the confessor of the order?"

"Yes, I; but we have no concern with each other, since you do not belong to the order."

"Monseigneur —"

"Oh, I understand perfectly that not being a member of the society you should refuse to obey its orders."

"Monseigneur, I beseech you, have the goodness to listen to me."

"For what purpose?"

"Monseigneur, I do not say that I am not connected with the order —"

"Ah, ha!"

"I do not say that I refuse to obey."

"What has just passed between us certainly looked like resistance, M. de Baisemeaux."

"Oh, no, monseigneur, no; only I wished to assure myself —"

"Assure yourself of what?" said Aramis, in a tone of supreme disdain.

"Of nothing, monseigneur." Then, lowering his voice and bowing low before the prelate, he added: "I am at all times and in all places at the disposition of my masters, but —"

"Very good! I like you much better thus, monsieur," and with this Aramis seated himself once more and held out his glass to Baisemeaux, whose hand shook so that he could hardly fill it.

"You were saying: 'but' —" resumed Aramis.

"But not having been warned," proceeded the poor man, "I was far from expecting —"

"Does not the Gospel say: 'Watch, therefore, for God alone knoweth the hour'? and do not the rules of the order say: 'Watch, for what I will, you must will always.' What pretext have you to offer for not expecting a confessor, M. de Baisemeaux?"

"Because at this moment there is no prisoner sick in the Bastille."

Aramis shrugged his shoulders. "How do you know?" he said.

"But it seems to me —"

"M. de Baisemeaux," said Aramis, leaning back in his chair, "here is your valet who wishes to speak to you."

At this moment, in fact, Baisemeaux's valet appeared at the door.

"What is wanted?" cried Baisemeaux, quickly.

"M. le Governor," said the valet, "it is the house-physician bringing you his report."

Aramis fixed his clear penetrating eye upon M. de Baisemeaux.

"Well," he said, "let the messenger enter."

The messenger accordingly entered, bowed, and presented his report. Baisemeaux glanced at it, and looking up suddenly, exclaimed in surprise: "The second Bertaudière is sick."

"What were you saying just now, dear M. de Baisemeaux? That every one was well in your hotel?" asked Aramis, carelessly, and he drank a glass of muscatel without taking his eyes off the governor. Then Baisemeaux, after making a sign to the messenger, who left the room, resumed in a trembling voice: "I think the paragraph said: 'At the request of the prisoner.'"

"Yes, it specified that," replied Aramis; "but see what they want of you, dear M. de Baisemeaux."

And in fact a sergeant just then showed his head at the half-opened door.

"What is it now?" cried Baisemeaux; "cannot I be left for ten minutes in peace?"

"M. le Governor," said the sergeant, "the sick man in the second Bertaudière has sent word by his jailer to ask to see a confessor."

Baisemeaux nearly fell from his chair. Aramis scorned to reassure him as he had scorned to terrify him.

"What must I answer?" asked Baisemeaux.

"Whatever you wish," replied Aramis, pursing his lips. "It is your concern. I am not the governor of the Bastille."

"Tell the prisoner," cried Baisemeaux, eagerly, "that he shall have what he asks for." Thereupon the sergeant went out.

"Oh! monseigneur," murmured Baisemeaux. "How could I have suspected? How could I have foreseen?"

"Who asked you to suspect? Who begged you to foresee?" replied Aramis, disdainfully. "The order foresees; the order knows; is not that sufficient?"

"What are your commands?" asked Baisemeaux.

"Mine? I have none to give. I am only a poor priest, a humble confessor. Do you order me to go to the sick man?"

"Oh! monseigneur, I do not order you, I beg of you."

"Very good, then. Conduct me to him."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE PRISONER.

SINCE Aramis' strange transformation into a confessor of the order had taken place, Baisemeaux was no longer the same man. Until now Aramis had been to the worthy governor a prelate to whom he owed respect, a friend to whom he owed gratitude; but from the moment that this revelation had come to overturn all his previous ideas, he had become an inferior, and Aramis his chief. He himself lighted a lantern, summoned a turnkey, and turning to Aramis, said:

"I am at monseigneur's orders."

Aramis contented himself with nodding his head, as if to say: "That is well," and motioning with his hand, "Walk ahead." Baisemeaux set forward at once, and Aramis followed him.

It was a beautiful starlit night; the steps of the three men resounded along the flagstones of the terraces, and the jangling of the great keys, hung at the warder's belt, rose to the uppermost towers, as if to remind the poor captives that

freedom was beyond their reach. It seemed as if the change which had taken place in Baisemeaux extended even to the jailer. This same turnkey who, on the occasion of Aramis' first visit, had shown himself so curious and loquacious, had become not only mute, but impassible. He walked with bent head, and seemed afraid of opening his ears. They arrived thus at the foot of the Bertaudière and mounted the two flights silently and slowly ; for Baisemeaux, although he obeyed, was far from obeying with alacrity.

At last they reached the door. The warder had no need to hunt for the key, for he had it ready, and opened at once. Baisemeaux was preparing to enter, when, stopping at the threshold, Aramis said : "It is not written that the governor shall hear the prisoner's confession."

Baisemeaux bent his head and let Aramis pass ; the latter, taking the lantern from the turnkey's hand, motioned to have the door closed behind him. For a moment he stood still, listening intently to make sure that Baisemeaux and the jailer had withdrawn ; then, when their retreating footsteps assured him that they had left the tower, he set down the lantern on a table and looked about him.

Upon a bed covered with green serge, and resembling all the other beds in the Bastille except in being newer, screened by the heavy half-drawn curtains, lay the young man whom Aramis had visited once before. According to the custom of the prison, the captive was without a light, having been obliged to extinguish his candle at the hour of curfew. It can be seen how highly this prisoner was favored, since he had the rare privilege of keeping a light until the curfew sounded.

Beside his bed stood a great leathern armchair with carved legs, over which was thrown his wearing apparel, remarkable for its air of freshness. A small table, devoid of books, papers, or ink, was standing neglected and bare near the window. Several plates, still covered with food, showed that the prisoner had scarcely touched his last meal.

Aramis saw the young man stretched out on the bed with his face half hidden in his arms.

He did not change his attitude upon the entrance of the visitor ; he was either sleeping or waiting. Aramis lighted the candle by means of the lantern, gently pushed back the armchair, and approached the bed, with a visible blending of respect and interest.

The young man raised his head.

"What do you want with me?" he said.

"Did you not ask to see a confessor?"

"Yes."

"Because you were ill?"

"Yes."

"Seriously ill?"

The young man fixed his penetrating eyes upon Aramis' face and said:

"I thank you;" then after a moment's silence, he added, "I have seen you before."

Aramis bowed. Without doubt the prisoner's scrutiny, revealing as it did those evidences of a cold, wily, and dominating nature which were impressed on the Bishop of Vannes' countenance, had been far from reassuring to one in his situation, for he added:

"I am better."

"What then?" asked Aramis.

"Why, then, since I am better, I no longer need a confessor, it would seem."

"Nor even the haircloth shirt promised to you in the note which you found in your bread?"

The prisoner started, but before he could answer or deny:

"Not even," went on Aramis, "that confessor from whose lips you are to hear an important revelation?"

"If that be so," replied the young man, falling back upon his pillow, "it is a different matter. I am listening."

Aramis thereupon looked at him more attentively and was astonished at his air of easy, simple majesty which can never be acquired, unless God has put it into the blood and heart.

"Be seated, monsieur," said the prisoner.

Aramis, with a bow, obeyed.

"How do you like the Bastille?" the bishop inquired.

"Very well."

"You are not suffering?"

"No."

"You regret nothing?"

"No."

"Not even liberty?"

"What do you call liberty, monsieur?" demanded the prisoner, in the tone of a man who is preparing for a struggle.

"I call liberty the open air, the sky, daylight, flowers and stars, the happiness of going wherever your active young limbs may carry you."

The young man smiled; it would have been hard to say whether it was a smile of resignation or of scorn.

"Look!" he said, "I have two roses yonder in that Japanese vase, two beautiful roses, picked yesterday, still in bud, in the governor's garden. They opened this morning and showed me their crimson petals; with each unfolding leaf they gave forth the treasure of their perfume, until my room is embalmed with it. Look at those two roses! They are the most beautiful of roses, and roses are the most beautiful of flowers. Why should I long for other flowers, since I have the most beautiful of all?"

Aramis gazed at the young man in surprise.

"If flowers are liberty," resumed the captive, with melancholy, "I have liberty since I have flowers."

"Oh, but the open air!" cried Aramis. "Air is necessary to life."

"Draw near the window, monsieur," went on the prisoner; "it is open. High up between earth and sky, the wind whirls by it in eddies of ice and of fire, of soft vapor and gentle breeze. The air that comes in by it caresses my cheek. When climbing up by my armchair, and seated on its back with my arm around the bars to sustain me, I feel as if I were swimming through space."

Aramis' brow grew darker and darker while the young man was speaking.

"As for daylight," the latter continued, "I have more than daylight, I have the sun, a friend who visits me every day, without the governor's leave, without the turnkey's company. He comes in by the window; he traces a great square of light in my chamber, stretching from my window to the very fringes of my bed curtains. This luminous square keeps growing from ten o'clock to noon, and diminishing from one o'clock to three, slowly, as if in haste to come, it were reluctant to leave me. When its last ray disappears I have enjoyed its presence for four hours. Does not that suffice? They tell me there are miserable beings who dig in quarries, who grope in mines and never see the sun."

Aramis wiped his brow.

"As for the stars, which are sweet to gaze upon," went on the

young man, "they are all alike except in size and splendor. I am greatly favored; for if you had not lighted that candle, you would have seen the beautiful stars I was watching from my bed before you entered and whose radiance caressed my eyes."

Aramis bowed his head; he felt himself submerged beneath the bitter flood of this sinister philosophy, which is a prisoner's religion.

"So much for the flowers, and the air, the daylight and the stars," the young man went on with the same tranquillity. "As for walks, do I not walk all day in the governor's garden when the weather is fine, and here in stormy weather, here where I am cool when it is hot outside, and warm when it is cold, thanks to my winter fire. Ah, believe me, monsieur," the prisoner added in a tone which was not exempt from a certain bitterness; "men have done all for me that a man can hope for or desire."

"Men, so be it!" said Aramis, raising his head. "But it seems that you forget God."

"I have in truth forgotten God," replied the prisoner, without emotion. "But why do you say that to me? Of what use to talk of God to prisoners?"

Aramis looked into the face of this strange young man who had the smile of an atheist with the resignation of a martyr.

"Is not God in all things?" he murmured in accents of reproach.

"Say rather at the end of all things," replied the prisoner, firmly.

"So be it!" said Aramis; "let us now go back to the point whence we started."

"I ask nothing better," said the young man.

"I am your confessor."

"Yes."

"Well, then, as my penitent you owe it to me to speak the whole truth."

"I ask nothing better than to speak it!"

"Every prisoner has committed some crime which has caused his imprisonment. What crime have you committed?"

"You asked me that before, when you saw me for the first time," said the prisoner.

"And you eluded an answer then as you do to-day."

"And why do you expect me to answer you to-day?"

"Because I am your confessor."

"Then if you wish me to tell you what crime I have committed, explain to me what a crime is. For since there is nothing within me that reproaches me, I affirm that I am not a criminal!"

"A man is sometimes a criminal in the eyes of the great of this earth, not for having committed crimes, but for knowing that crimes have been committed."

The prisoner listened with close attention.

"Yes," he said, after a moment's silence, "I understand; yes, you are right, monsieur; it may have been in that way that I became a criminal in the eyes of the great."

"Ah! you know something, then?" said Aramis, who thought he had discovered, if not the vulnerable point, at least the joint in the cuirass.

"No, I know nothing," replied the young man; "but I think sometimes, and at such moments I say to myself —"

"What do you say to yourself?"

"That if I could think a little deeper I should either go mad or I should guess many things."

"Well, and then?" asked Aramis, impatiently.

"Then I stop short."

"You stop short?"

"Yes, my head grows heavy, my thoughts grow sad; I feel *ennui* taking hold upon me; I wish for —"

"What?"

"I do not know; for I will not let myself be carried away by the desire for what I have not, I who am so content with what I have."

"Do you fear death?" asked Aramis, anxiously.

"Yes," replied the young man, with a smile.

"Oh, then, since you fear death, you know more than you will say."

"And you," answered the prisoner, "you who sent word to me that I should ask for you; you who entered here with assurance of a world of revelations you were about to make to me, how does it happen that you are silent, and it is I who speak? Since we are each wearing a mask, let us both keep it on or both lay it aside together."

Aramis felt at once the force and justice of this reasoning.

"I have no ordinary man to deal with," he thought within

himself; then he said aloud, without preparing the prisoner for this sudden transition:

"Tell me, are you ambitious?"

"What is ambition?" asked the young man.

"It is a sentiment," replied Aramis, "which is ever driving a man on to desire more than he has."

"I told you, monsieur, that I was content, but it may be that I am deceiving myself. I do not know what ambition is, but it is possible that I may possess it. Come, then, open and enlarge my mind, I ask nothing better."

"An ambitious man," said Aramis, "is one who covets a station above his own."

"I covet nothing beyond my station," said the young man in such a tone of decision that the Bishop of Vannes was once more taken by surprise.

He was silent, but on looking at the captive's ardent eyes, his contracted brow, his attitude of deep reflection, Aramis realized that he expected something more of him; he therefore broke the silence:

"You uttered a falsehood to me when I saw you first," he said.

"A falsehood?" cried the youth, rising from his recumbent attitude with such a tone in his voice, with such fire in his eyes, that Aramis recoiled in spite of himself.

"I should have said," he resumed, bending his head, "that you disguised from me what you know about your childhood."

"A man's secrets are his own, monsieur, and not at the mercy of the first comer."

"Very true," said Aramis, bowing still lower than before, "very true! pardon me; but to-day, am I still the first comer for you? Answer me, I beseech you, *monseigneur!*"

This title seemed to cause the prisoner a slight distress, yet he did not appear astonished at its being given him.

"I do not know you, monsieur," he said.

"Oh, if I dared, I would take your hand in mine, and I would kiss that hand."

The young man made a motion as if about to give his hand to Aramis; but the light which had flashed for a moment from his eyes faded out beneath the lids that drooped, and he drew back his hand in cold distrust.

"Kiss the hand of a prisoner!" he said, with a shake of the head. "What were the good?"

"Why did you tell me," asked Aramis, "that you were satisfied here? Why did you tell me that you aspired to nothing beyond? Why, in short, by speaking thus, did you prevent my being frank in my turn?"

The same flash reappeared a third time in the youth's glance, but once more died out without leading to any revelation.

"You mistrust me," said Aramis.

"For what reason, monsieur?"

"Oh! for a very simple reason. Because knowing what you must know, you are bound to distrust all the world."

"Then do not be surprised at my distrust, since you suspect me of knowing what I do not know."

Aramis was struck with admiration by this energetic resistance.

"Oh, monseigneur! you fill me with despair," he cried, striking the chair with his clinched fist.

"And I do not understand you, monsieur."

"Try, then, to understand me."

The prisoner looked searchingly at Aramis.

"It seems to me at times," the latter went on, "that I have before me the man whom I am seeking — and then —"

"And then — that man disappears, does he not?" said the prisoner, with a smile. "So much the better!"

Aramis rose. "Decidedly," he said, "I have nothing more to say to a man who distrusts me as you seem to do."

"And I," added the prisoner, in the same tone, "have nothing to say to a man who will not understand that a prisoner must distrust every one."

"Even his old friends?" said Aramis. "Oh, that is too much prudence, monseigneur."

"My old friends? You are one of my old friends, then? You?"

"Let us see!" said Aramis; "do you not remember of having seen, sometimes, in the village where you passed your earliest childhood —"

"Do you know the name of that village?" asked the prisoner.

"Noisy-le-Sec, monseigneur," replied Aramis, firmly.

"Go on," said the young man, whose face gave no sign of admission or denial.

"Look you, monseigneur," said Aramis, "if you insist upon keeping up this comedy, we will stop where we are. I came

to say many things to you, it is true, but you must give me some evidence on your side that you wish to hear these things. Before speaking, before making disclosures of so important a nature as those which I have hitherto kept concealed, you must admit that I require the aid — if not of some frankness on your part — at least of a little sympathy and confidence. But you keep up this fiction of assumed ignorance which paralyzes me. Oh! not for the reason you suppose, for however ignorant you may be on the subject, or however indifferent you may feign to be, you are none the less what you are, monseigneur, and nothing, nothing on earth, — do you hear? — can alter the fact of your being so.”

“I promise you,” replied the prisoner, “to listen to you without impatience, only it seems to me that I have the right to repeat the question I have already put to you: ‘Who are you?’”

“Do you remember, fifteen or eighteen years ago, seeing at Noisy-le-Sec a cavalier who rode with a lady — a lady who was usually clad in black silk with flame-colored ribbons in her hair?”

“Yes,” said the young man; “once I asked the name of this cavalier and was told that he was called the Abbé d’Herblay. I was amazed that this abbé should have such a martial air, and was told that there was nothing surprising in that since he had been one of the musketeers of King Louis XIII.”

“Well!” said Aramis, “that former musketeer, then an abbé, afterwards Bishop of Vannes, and to-day your confessor, was I.”

“I knew it. I had recognized you.”

“Well, monseigneur, if you know that, I must add one thing more, which you do not know; that is, that if the presence here of this musketeer, of this abbé, of this bishop, of this confessor were known to the King, — by this evening or to-morrow’s dawn, he who has risked everything to come to you would see the headsman’s axe gleaming from the depths of a dungeon far darker and more obscure than this of yours.”

In listening to these words, firmly uttered, the youth had risen upon his bed and had plunged a more and more ardent gaze into Aramis’ face. As a result of this scrutiny, the prisoner seemed to acquire greater confidence.

“Yes,” he murmured; “yes, I remember perfectly. The lady of whom you speak came once with you, and twice more with —” here he stopped.

"With the lady who came to see you every month, you mean, monseigneur?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who that lady was?"

A light seemed to flash from the prisoner's eye.

"I know that she was a lady of the court," he said.

"Do you remember this lady well?"

"Oh! my recollections on that subject cannot be very uncertain," replied the young prisoner. "I saw that lady once in company with a man of forty-five years or thereabouts. I saw her once with you, and with the lady in the black dress with flame-colored ribbons; and I saw her twice afterwards with the same companion. These four persons, with my tutor and old Perronnette, my jailer, and the governor, are the only persons to whom I have ever spoken, and in truth almost the only persons I have ever seen."

"You were in prison then?"

"If I am in prison here, I was comparatively free there, although my liberty was very restrained; a house which I never left, a great garden surrounded by walls which I could not pass. Such was my dwelling; you know it, for you have been there. Moreover, being accustomed to live within the limits of that house and those garden-walls, I never desired to go beyond them. You understand, therefore, monseigneur, that having seen nothing of this world, I can wish for nothing, and if you have something to relate to me you will be obliged to explain everything."

"I shall do so, monseigneur," said Aramis, bowing, "for it is my duty."

"Well, then, begin by telling me who my tutor was."

"An excellent gentleman, monseigneur, above all, an honest gentleman, a worthy preceptor at the same time for your body and your soul. Did you ever have cause to complain of him?"

"Oh, no, monsieur, on the contrary; but this gentleman often told me that my father and my mother were dead. Did this gentleman tell me a lie or the truth?"

"He was forced to obey the orders given him."

"He was lying, then?"

"On one point, yes. Your father is dead."

"And my mother?"

"Is dead for you."

"But for others she is living, is she not?"

"Yes."

"And I" (the young man looked at Aramis), "I am doomed to live always in the obscurity of a prison?"

"Alas, I believe so."

"And that," continued the young man, "because my presence in the world would reveal a great secret?"

"A great secret; yes."

"To have a child such as I was confined in the Bastille, my enemy must be very powerful."

"He is so."

"More powerful than my mother, then?"

"Why so?"

"Because my mother would have protected me."

Aramis hesitated.

"More powerful than your mother, yes, monseigneur."

"For my tutor and my nurse to have been carried off and parted from me as they were, I must have been, or they must have been, a source of great danger to my enemy?"

"Yes, a danger from which your enemy saved himself by causing this gentleman and the nurse to disappear," answered Aramis, quietly.

"Disappear?" asked the prisoner. "In what manner did they disappear?"

"In the surest way," replied Aramis; "they are dead."

The young man turned slightly paler, and passed a trembling hand across his brow.

"By poison?" he asked.

"By poison."

The prisoner reflected a moment.

"For those two innocent beings," he went on, "my only stay and comfort, to have been assassinated in one day, my enemy must have been very cruel or the necessity very great; for that worthy gentleman and that poor woman had never injured any one."

"Necessity is stern in your house, monseigneur, and it is necessity alone which has led me, to my great regret, to tell you that this gentleman and your nurse were assassinated."

"Oh! you have told me nothing new," said the prisoner, knitting his brows.

"How is that?"

"I suspected it."

“And why?”

“I am about to tell you.”

At this moment the youth, leaning upon both elbows, brought his face close to Aramis' with such an expression upon it, of dignity, of abnegation, of defiance even, that the bishop felt an electric shock of enthusiasm mount in fiery sparks from his withered heart to his adamant brain.

“Speak, monseigneur. I have already told you that I am risking my life in speaking to you. However slight a thing my life may be, I beg you to receive it as a ransom for yours.”

“Well, then,” resumed the young man, “this is why I suspected that my nurse had been killed, and my tutor —”

“Whom you called your father.”

“Yes, whom I called my father, but of whom I know myself not to be the son.”

“How did you discover this?”

“Just as you are too respectful to be a friend, he was too respectful to be my father.”

“I, for my part,” said Aramis, “have nothing to disguise.”

The young man bowed and went on:

“Doubtless I was not then destined to perpetual confinement, and what makes me sure of it now, as I look back, is the pains that was taken to make me an accomplished cavalier. The gentleman who had charge of me taught me all that he knew himself: mathematics, a little geometry and astronomy, fencing, and horsemanship. Every morning I took fencing lessons in a hall on the ground floor, and rode about the garden. Well, one morning in summer, when the heat was great, I had fallen asleep in this lower hall. Nothing up to this time, except the deference of my tutor, had awakened in me the slightest suspicions — I lived as children live, as birds and plants live, simply on air and sun. I was just fifteen.”

“That was eight years ago, then?”

“Yes, thereabouts. I have lost count of time.”

“Pardon me, but what did your tutor say to encourage you in your studies?”

“He said that a man should strive in this world to acquire the fortune which Heaven had denied him at birth. He added that I, being of obscure origin, poor, and an orphan, had only myself to depend upon, and that there were none to interest themselves in my behalf. I was in this lower hall, then, and, tired out by my fencing lesson, had fallen

asleep. My tutor was in his chamber on the first flight, directly above me. Suddenly I heard my tutor give a low cry, and then call, 'Perronnette! Perronnette!' That was my nurse."

"Yes, I know," said Aramis. "Go on, monseigneur, go on."

"She was undoubtedly in the garden, for my tutor descended the staircase hurriedly. I rose, anxious at sight of his anxiety. He opened the door leading from the vestibule into the garden, still calling, 'Perronnette! Perronnette!' The windows of the lower hall looked out upon the court-yard; the blinds were closed, but through an opening in one of the blinds I saw my tutor approach a large well, which was situated directly under the windows of his study. He bent over the edge, and gazed into the well, still calling, and making frantic gestures. From where I stood I could not only see, but hear plainly."

"Go on, monseigneur, I beg you," said Aramis.

"Dame Perronnette ran up at the tutor's cries. He took her by the hand, drew her to the well, and bending over it with her, cried: 'Look, look! What a misfortune.' 'Come, come, calm yourself,' said Dame Perronnette. 'What has happened?' 'That letter,' cried my tutor. 'Do you see that letter?' and he pointed down the well.

"'What letter?' asked the nurse.

"'That letter which you see down there is my last letter from the queen.'

"At that word I started. Why should my tutor — he who passed for my father, he who was constantly enjoining modesty and humility upon me — be in correspondence with the queen?

"'The last letter from the queen?' exclaimed Dame Perronnette, without manifesting surprise, except at seeing this letter in the bottom of the well. 'How did it come there?'

"'An accident, Dame Perronnette, a singular accident. I was returning to my room, and as I opened the door, the window opposite being open, there was a sudden draught, and I saw a paper flying. I recognized the paper as the queen's letter, and ran to the window with a cry, but too late. After fluttering for a moment in the air the letter fell into the bottom of the well.'

"'What are the odds?' said Dame Perronnette, 'if the letter is at the bottom of the well it is the same as if it were burnt; and since the queen herself burns her letters every time she comes here —'

"Every time she comes! Therefore the lady who came to visit us every month was the queen," said the prisoner, interrupting his narrative.

Aramis nodded assent.

"'Doubtless, doubtless,' answered the old gentleman, 'but this letter contained instructions. How can I follow them now?'

"'Write at once to the queen, tell her what has happened, and the queen will write you another letter in place of this one.'

"'Oh! the queen will never believe in such an accident,' said the poor man, shaking his head; 'she will think I wish to keep this letter, instead of returning it to her as I have done all the others, in order to use it as a weapon against her. She is so distrustful, and M. de Mazarin so — that Italian fiend is capable of having us imprisoned on the slightest suspicion.'"

Aramis smiled with an imperceptible nod.

"'You know, Dame Perronnette, they are both so suspicious in regard to Philippe.'

"Philippe is the name they gave me," interrupted the prisoner.

"'Very well, then, there must be no hesitation. Some one must go down the well,' said Dame Perronnette.

"'Yes, in order that whoever brings back the letter may read it as he comes up.'

"'Let us take some villager who does not know how to read; then your mind will be at ease.'

"'So be it! But will not whoever goes down the well suspect the importance of a paper for which we are willing to risk a man's life? However, you have given me an idea, Dame Perronnette; yes, some one shall go down the well, and it shall be myself.'

"But at this proposition Dame Perronnette cried out in consternation, and implored him with tears to do nothing of the kind, so that at last he promised her to go in search of a ladder long enough to reach down the well; while she was to hasten to the farm and secure a daring boy who could be made to believe that a jewel had fallen into the well, wrapped up in a sheet of paper; and since the paper, remarked my tutor, would open in the water, it would not be surprising that the jewel should have dropped out.

"'By that time the writing may be effaced,' said Dame Perronnette.

“That matters little, if we can secure the letter. For if we return that to the queen, she will see that we have not betrayed her, and consequently not having aroused M. de Mazarin’s suspicions, we shall have nothing to fear from him.’

“Having come to this decision, they separated. I drew the blind together, and seeing my tutor about to enter, I threw myself back among my cushions with a humming in my ears caused by all I had heard. My tutor partly opened the door, and seeing me upon the couch, apparently asleep, he softly closed it again. Scarcely was it shut when I arose and, listening intently, heard the sound of retreating steps; I then flew to the blind again and saw my tutor and Dame Perronnette going out together.

“I was alone in the house.

“They had no sooner closed the door than, without stopping to cross the vestibule, I jumped out of the window and ran to the well. Then I leaned over it in my turn, as my tutor had done.

“Something white and shining was trembling there amidst the quivering circles of greenish water; this brilliant disk fascinated me and drew my eyes to it, while my breath came in gasps; the well seemed to be sucking me in with its great open mouth and its icy breath. I seemed to read in its depths letters of fire traced by the hand of the queen. Then without knowing what I did, animated by one of those fatal instincts which draw us toward an abyss, I let down the rope over the well-sweep until the bucket had descended into about three feet of water, taking care meantime not to disturb the precious paper, which was beginning to change its whiteness for a greenish tinge which showed that it was sinking; then holding the rope with a wet piece of cloth over my hands, I swung down into the abyss.

“When I found myself hanging above that pool of dark water, when I saw the sky retreating above my head, I was chilled with terror and dizziness, and my hair stood up on my head; but by force of will I conquered this terror and distress. I reached the water, and dived once, holding to the rope with one hand while I stretched out the other and caught hold of the precious paper, which tore in two in my grasp. I hid the two fragments in my doublet, and aiding myself with my feet against the sides of the well, and hanging by my hands, I drew myself up, agile and vigorous as I was, and above all in desperate haste, and thus reached the margin again. This I

flooded as I touched it with the water which was pouring from me in streams. Once outside the well with my capture, I ran in the sun to the end of the garden, whence I plunged into the woods where I meant to hide myself.

"Just as I had set foot in my hiding-place, the bell which hung over the great gate rang. It was my tutor returning. I was just in time.

"I reckoned that I had still ten minutes before he could reach me, even if he came straight after me — twenty minutes if he lost time searching for me. That was enough to read this precious letter, which I hastened to piece together. The writing was already beginning to disappear; still I managed to decipher it."

"And what did you read there, monseigneur?" asked Aramis, with keen interest.

"Enough to convince me, monsieur, that my tutor was a nobleman, that Perronnette, without being a great lady, was something above a servant, and in short that I myself was of no mean lineage since the queen, Anne of Austria, and the prime minister, Mazarin, deigned to recommend me with such care."

The young man ceased, greatly moved.

"And what happened then?" asked Aramis.

"This happened, monsieur," he replied, "that the laborer, summoned by my tutor, found nothing in the well, after searching it thoroughly. It also happened that my tutor discovered that the margin of the well was dripping; it happened that I had not dried myself so thoroughly in the sun that Dame Perronnette could not perceive that my clothes were damp; finally it happened that I was seized with a high fever caused by the chill of the water and the excitement of my discovery, and that this fever was succeeded by delirium, in which I told everything; in consequence my tutor, guided by my own avowal, found under my pillow the torn fragments of the queen's letter."

"Ah!" exclaimed Aramis, "I understand all at last."

"From that time on all is conjecture. Doubtless the poor gentleman and the poor woman, not daring to keep secret all that had taken place, wrote everything to the queen, and sent her the torn letter."

"After which," said Aramis, "you were arrested and brought to the Bastille."

"As you see."

"Then your two servants disappeared?"

"Alas!"

"Let us not concern ourselves with the dead," resumed Aramis. "Let us see what can be done for the living. You told me that you were resigned?"

"Yes, and I now repeat it."

"Without desire for freedom?"

"So I have said."

"Without ambition, without thought, without regret?"

The young man made no answer.

"Well," asked Aramis, "you are silent?"

"I think I have said enough," replied the prisoner. "It is your turn now; I am weary."

"I will obey you," said Aramis.

Thereupon he bethought himself a moment, and a shade of deep solemnity spread itself over his face. It was apparent that a critical moment had arrived for the part which he had come to play in the prison.

"One question first," said Aramis.

"What is it? Speak!"

"In the house where you dwelt, was there a glass or mirror?"

"What are these words, and what do they mean? I do not even know them."

"We call a glass or mirror an article of furniture which reflects objects, which, for example, enables one to see one's own face as you see mine with the naked eye."

"No, there was no glass or mirror in the house," replied the young man.

Aramis looked about him. "And there is none here," he said; "the same precautions have been taken here as there."

"For what reason, then?"

"You shall know directly. Now, pardon me a moment; you told me that you had been taught mathematics, astronomy, the art of fencing, and horsemanship; were you never instructed in history?"

"Sometimes my tutor related to me the exploits of Saint Louis, of King Francis I., or Henri IV."

"And was that all?"

"Very nearly all."

"Yes, I see that was also a deliberate design; as they had deprived you of mirrors, which reflect the present, so they left you in ignorance of history, which reflects the past. Ever since your imprisonment, books have been forbidden you, so that many facts are totally unknown to you by which you might have rebuilt the crumbling edifice of your memories, or of what most intimately concerns you."

"That is true," the youth answered.

"Listen, then, I will relate to you in a few words what has occurred in France during the last twenty three or four years, that is to say, since the supposed date of your birth, and accordingly in the period most interesting to you."

"Speak!" and the youth resumed his serious and reflective attitude.

"Do you know who was the son of King Henri IV.?"

"I know, at least, who was his successor."

"How did you learn that?"

"Through seeing a coin bearing the date of 1610, with the effigy of King Henri IV., and another of the year 1612, stamped with the image of King Louis XIII. I inferred, therefore, that since there were but two years between the two coins, Louis XIII. must have been the successor of Henri IV."

"You know, then, that the last reigning monarch was Louis XIII.?"

"I know it," replied the young man, flushing slightly.

"Good! He was a prince, then, filled with excellent ideas, with great projects which were constantly adjourned on account of the calamities of the time, and the conflict which his prime minister, Richelieu, had to sustain against the great nobles of France. He personally (I refer to King Louis XIII.) was of weak character. He died young and his end was a sad one."

"I am aware of that."

"He had long been preoccupied with anxiety as to his succession. That is one of the burdens of princes, who must leave behind them on earth something more than a memory, in order that their great thoughts may live and their work be carried on."

"Did the King Louis XIII. die without leaving children?" asked the prisoner, with a smile.

"No, but he was long deprived of the happiness of having

a child of his own; for long years he believed that he should die without posterity, and this thought had reduced him to the depths of despair, when suddenly his wife, Anne of Austria —”

The prisoner started.

“Did you know,” went on Aramis, “that Anne of Austria was the wife of Louis XIII.?”

“Go on,” said the young man, without a reply.

“When suddenly,” resumed Aramis, “the queen, Anne of Austria, announced that she was about to be confined. His joy was great at these tidings and every wish was offered up for her happy delivery. At last on the 5th of September, 1638, she gave birth to a son.”

Here Aramis looked at his companion and saw that he had turned pale.

“You are about to hear a narrative,” pursued Aramis, “that few men, living at this hour, are in a position to relate, for this narrative is a secret which is believed to be buried with the dead and to slumber amid the deepest secrets of the confessional.”

“And you are about to tell me this secret?” asked the youth.

“Oh!” exclaimed Aramis, with an accent which could not be misunderstood, “I do not feel that I imperil this secret by confiding it to a prisoner who has no desire ever to quit the Bastille.”

“I am listening, monsieur.”

“The queen, as I was saying, gave birth to a son. But after all the court had hailed the news with shouts of joy, after the King had shown the new-born child to his people and to his nobles, while he was gayly seated at table celebrating the joyous event, — at that moment the queen, left alone in her chamber, felt the pains of childbirth once more, and brought into the world another son.”

“Oh!” cried the prisoner, betraying a greater degree of knowledge than he had admitted before, “I thought that Monsieur was not born until —”

Aramis raised his finger.

“Wait, while I go on,” he said.

The prisoner heaved an impatient sigh and waited.

“Yes,” said Aramis, “the queen had a second son whom Dame Perronnette the midwife received in her arms.”

"Dame Perronnette!" murmured the young man.

"A messenger was sent in haste to the hall, where the King was dining, and warned him in a whisper of what had taken place. He arose from the table and hastened to the queen's chamber; but it was not joy which his look expressed, rather something akin to terror. The birth of twin sons changed to bitterness the joy which had been caused by the birth of one, because (you doubtless were not aware of what I am about to tell you), because in France it is the oldest son who succeeds his father on the throne."

"I was aware of that."

"And doctors and jurists agree in holding it doubtful whether the son who is brought first into the world is really the elder by the law of God and nature."

The prisoner uttered a stifled cry and became whiter than the sheet beneath which he hid his face.

"You understand now," pursued Aramis, "that the King who with such feelings of joy had seen himself possessed of an heir, was plunged in despair on reflecting that he now had two; and that the one latest born and still unknown to the world might live to contest the rights of seniority with the other who had come into the world two hours earlier, and who, two hours earlier, had been recognized as the heir. Thus this second son might come some day, armed with his own rights, and the adherence of a party, to sow discord and civil war in the kingdom, and thus destroy the dynasty instead of consolidating it."

"Oh, I understand, I understand!" murmured the young man.

"Well, this is what is related," said Aramis, "this is what is affirmed; this is why one of the sons of Anne of Austria, shamefully separated from his brother, kept in shameful confinement, hidden in the deepest obscurity — this is why that second son has disappeared, and disappeared so utterly that no one in France to-day is aware of his existence except — his mother!"

"Yes, his mother who has abandoned him!" cried the prisoner in accents of despair.

"Excepting also," continued Aramis, "the lady dressed in black, with flame-colored ribbons, and excepting finally —"

"Excepting yourself, is it not so? You who have come to tell me all this, you who have come to awaken in my breast

curiosity, hatred, ambition, and perhaps — who knows? — a thirst for vengeance; you, monsieur, who, if you are the man I await, the man promised me by that note, the man, in short, whom Heaven was to send to me, must have upon your person — ”

“What?” asked Aramis.

“A likeness of King Louis XIV., who is now reigning on the throne of France.”

“Here is the likeness,” replied the bishop, handing the prisoner an exquisite miniature in enamel, representing a living image of Louis XIV. in all his pride and beauty.

The prisoner seized the picture eagerly and fixed his gaze upon it as if he would devour it.

“And now, monseigneur,” said Aramis, “here is a mirror!”

Aramis left the prisoner time to collect his thoughts.

“So high! so high!” murmured the youth, while he devoured with his eyes the likeness of Louis XIV. and his own image reflected in the mirror.

“What think you?” said Aramis at last.

“I think that I am lost,” replied the captive, “that the King will never forgive me.”

“And I am asking myself,” pursued the bishop, fixing upon the prisoner a glance instinct with meaning, “I am asking myself which of the two is king, the one represented by the portrait or the one reflected by the glass.”

“The King,” replied the young man, sadly, “is he who is seated on the throne; it is he who is not in prison, but he who puts others there. Royalty is power, and you see well that I am powerless.”

“Monseigneur,” replied Aramis, with a respect which he had not yet shown, “the King may be he — heed well my words — who coming forth from his prison knows how to maintain himself upon the throne where his friends will seat him.”

“Monsieur, do not tempt me!” said the prisoner, bitterly.

“Monseigneur, do not be weak!” urged Aramis, with energy. “I have brought hither all the proofs of your birth. Consult them, convince yourself that you are the son of a king, and then — act!”

“No, no, it is impossible.”

“Unless,” resumed the bishop, in a tone of irony, “unless it be the destiny of your race that brothers, excluded from the throne, should all be princes devoid of valor and of honor,

like M. Gaston d'Orléans, your uncle, who conspired ten several times against his brother, Louis XIII."

"My uncle Gaston d'Orléans conspired against his brother?" cried the prince, aghast; "he conspired to dethrone him?"

"Most certainly, monseigneur, for nothing else."

"What are you telling me, monsieur?"

"The truth."

"And he had friends — devoted to him?"

"As I am to you."

"And what happened? He failed?"

"He failed, but always through his own fault; and each time, in order to save, not his life, — for the life of the King's brother is inviolable, — but his liberty, your uncle sacrificed the life of each of his friends in turn. And for that reason he is to-day the shame of history, and his name is held in execration by a hundred noble families of this kingdom."

"I understand, monsieur," said the prince. "Was it through weakness or through perfidy that my uncle caused the death of his friends?"

"Through weakness, which is always perfidy on the part of princes."

"May they not fail, too, through ignorance or incapacity? Do you believe it possible for a poor captive such as I, brought up, not only far from the court, but far from the world, to aid those of his friends who should attempt to serve him?"

And as Aramis was about to reply, the young man cried out suddenly, with a violence which betrayed the power of race:

"We speak of friends; but by what chance could I possess friends, I who am unknown, and who have nothing by which to win friends — neither freedom, money, nor power?"

"Yet it seems I have the honor to offer my services to your royal Highness."

"Oh, do not call me thus, monsieur! it is a mockery and a cruelty. Do not make me dream of aught beyond the walls of the prison which enclose me; let me go on cherishing, or at least enduring, my slavery and obscurity."

"Monseigneur! monseigneur! If you speak those despondent words again, if after seeing the proofs of your birth you remain poor of spirit, devoid of aspiration and of will, — I shall yield to your wishes, I shall depart, I shall renounce the service of the master to whom I came with such ardor to devote to him my services and my life."

"Monsieur, before telling me all that you have told me, would it not have been better to pause and reflect that you were breaking my heart forever?"

"That was what I wished to do, monseigneur."

"Monsieur! to speak to me of grandeur, of power, of royalty even, you should not have chosen a prison! You would have me believe in splendor when we are buried in night! You boast to me of glory, while our very words are stifled beneath the curtains of this wretched pallet! You would hint to me of supreme power, while I can hear the steps of the jailer in that corridor — steps which cause you to tremble far more than I! If you would make me more credulous of all these things, drag me forth from the Bastille; give me air to fill my lungs, spurs upon my feet, a sword in my grasp, and then we may begin to understand each other."

"It is my intention to give you all this, and much more, monseigneur; only — do you wish for it?"

"Listen again, monsieur," interrupted the prince. "I know that there are guards in each gallery, bolts on every door, soldiers and cannon at every gate. How will you subdue the guards and spike the cannon? How will you burst the bolts and break through the gates?"

"Monseigneur, how did I send you the note which you read, announcing my coming?"

"It is easy to bribe a jailer to carry a note."

"If one jailer can be bribed, so can ten."

"Well, then, I admit that it may be possible to rescue a poor captive from the Bastille; possible to hide him so that the King's officers may not recapture him; possible even to sustain the poor wretch's life in some obscure refuge!"

"Monseigneur!" exclaimed Aramis, with a smile.

"I admit that he who would do all this for me would be more than man; but since you affirm that I am a prince, a brother of the King, how can you give me back the rank and power which my mother and my brother have torn from me? How, since I must pass my life in strife and hate, can you make me a conqueror in battle and invulnerable to my enemies? Ah! monsieur, think what you are about to do! Fling me to-morrow into some dark cave in the depths of a mountain; give me the joy of hearing in freedom the sounds of stream and meadow, of gazing in freedom upon the sky in sunshine and in storm, and that will suffice. Do not promise me more, for

in truth you can give me no more, and it would be a crime to deceive me, since you call yourself my friend."

Aramis listened awhile in silence. "Monseigneur!" he resumed after reflecting for a moment, "I admire the firm and sound good sense which dictates your words; I am happy in having divined my king."

"Once more, once more! Oh, in pity's name!" cried the prince, pressing his icy hands to his burning brow; "do not delude me; I do not need to be a king, monsieur, in order to be the happiest of men."

"And I, monseigneur, have need of you for my king, for the happiness of humanity."

"Ah!" cried the prince, his distrust awakened anew by this word, "what reproach has humanity to bring against my brother?"

"I had forgotten to say to you, monseigneur, that if you will deign to let yourself be guided by me, if you will consent to become the most powerful prince on earth, you will serve the interests of all the friends whom I devote to your cause, and these friends are many."

"Many?"

"Yes, and, still more, powerful."

"Explain yourself."

"Impossible! I will explain myself, I swear it before God who hears me, upon the day when I shall see you seated on the throne of France."

"But my brother?"

"You shall decide his fate. Do you pity him?"

"He who has left me to perish in a dungeon? No; I do not pity him!"

"So much the better!"

"He might so easily have come to me in this prison, have taken me by the hand and said: 'My brother, God has created us to love, not to be at strife with each other. I have come to you. A ferocious prejudice has condemned you to perish in obscurity far from mankind, deprived of every joy. I wish to seat you beside me; I wish to gird you with our father's sword. Will you take advantage of your nearness to me to use force against me? Will you use this sword to shed my blood?' 'Oh, never,' I should have answered; 'I look upon you as my deliverer, I will revere you as my master, you have given me more than God ever gave me. Through you I am

free, through you I have the right to love and to be loved in the world of the living.' ”

“ And you would have kept your word, monseigneur ? ”

“ Yes, upon my life.”

“ Whereas now — ”

“ Whereas now I feel that I have the guilty to punish — ”

“ In what way, monseigneur ? ”

“ What say you of that likeness to my brother which God has given me ? ”

“ I say that there was in that very likeness a warning of Providence which the King should not have neglected ; I say that your mother was guilty of a crime in making such a difference in honor and fortune between those whom nature had created so alike ; and I conclude therefore that the punishment can consist only in reëstablishing the equilibrium between you.”

“ By which you mean — ”

“ That if I give you back your rightful place upon your brother's throne, your brother shall take your place in your prison.”

“ Alas ! one suffers so much in prison, and above all when one has drunk so deeply of the cup of life ! ”

“ Your royal Highness will always be free to do your will. You can pardon if it seems good to you after punishing.”

“ It is well ; and now, do you know one thing, monsieur ? ”

“ Speak, prince.”

“ It is that I will listen to you no farther until we are outside the Bastille.”

“ I was about to say to your royal Highness that I should have the honor of seeing you but once more.”

“ When will that be ? ”

“ The day when my prince leaves these black walls forever.”

“ May God hear you ! How will you give me notice ? ”

“ By coming to release you.”

“ Yourself ? ”

“ My prince, do not leave this chamber except with me ; or, if you are forced to do so in my absence, remember that it is not my doing.”

“ So, not a word to any one whatever except to you ? ”

“ Only to me.”

Aramis bowed low. The prince held out his hand.

“ Monsieur,” he said, with an accent which came from the

heart, "I have one last word to say to you: If you have come to me in order to destroy me; if you have been merely an instrument in the hands of my enemies; if there should result from our conference, in which you have sounded the depths of my heart, something worse for me than captivity — that is, death — may you be blessed even then, for you will have ended my sorrows and have brought me calm in place of the feverish tortures which have devoured me these eight long years."

"Monseigneur, wait before you judge me," said Aramis.

"I have said that I should bless and forgive you. If, on the other hand, you have come to give me back the place which God destined for me in the full sunshine of fortune and glory; if, thanks to you, I may live in the memory of mankind, and do honor to my race by illustrious deeds and by some services rendered to my people; if from the low degree where I languish I rise to the heights of honor, upheld by your generous hand, then, indeed, to you — whom I thank and bless — to you the half of my power and my glory! You will still be ill repaid, your share will still be unequal, for never can I bestow on you one-half the happiness you will have given me."

"Monseigneur," said Aramis, moved by the pallor and the transports of the young man, "your nobleness of heart fills me with joy and admiration. It is not for you to thank me. It will be above all for the people whom you will make happy, for your descendants whom you will make illustrious. Yes, I shall have given you more than life — I shall give you immortality."

The youth held out his hand to Aramis, who kissed it, kneeling.

"Oh!" protested the prince, with charming modesty.

"It is the first homage tendered to our future king," said Aramis. "When I see you next I shall greet you with 'Good-day, Sire!'"

"Until then," cried the young man, pressing his white, emaciated hands upon his heart, "until then, no more dreams, no more shocks in my life, or it will be shattered! Oh! monsieur, how small is my cell, and how low my window! How narrow are these doors! How can so much pride, so much happiness, so much splendor, have passed through and been curtained here?"

"Your royal Highness fills me with pride," said Aramis,

"by assuming that it is I who have brought all this," and he knocked at once on the door.

The jailer hastened to open it, accompanied by Baisemeaux, who, devoured by anxiety and fear, had begun to listen in spite of himself at the chamber door.

Happily, neither of the interlocutors had forgotten to lower his voice, even in their most daring outbursts of passion.

"What a confession!" exclaimed the governor, attempting to laugh. "Who could have believed that a recluse, a man half-buried, could have committed so many and such lengthy sins?"

Aramis was silent. He was in haste to leave the Bastille where the secret that oppressed him seemed to double the weight of the heavy walls.

When they had reached Baisemeaux's rooms:

"Let us talk business, my dear governor," said Aramis.

"Alas!" replied Baisemeaux.

"You have to request my receipt for a hundred and fifty thousand livres?"

"And to pay the first instalment of one-third of that sum," sighed the poor governor, taking three steps in the direction of his iron chest.

"Here is your receipt," said Aramis.

"And here is the money," replied M. de Baisemeaux, with a threefold sigh.

"The order read merely that I was to give you a receipt for fifty thousand francs," said Aramis. "Nothing was said about my receiving money. Adieu, monsieur."

And he departed, leaving Baisemeaux suffocated with surprise and delight over this royal present, made in so grand a style by the extraordinary confessor of the Bastille.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SHOWING HOW MOUSTON HAD GROWN FAT WITHOUT GIVING PORTHOS WARNING, AND OF THE ANNOYANCE RESULTING THEREFROM TO THAT WORTHY GENTLEMAN.

SINCE Athos' departure for Blois, Porthos and D'Artagnan had met but rarely ; one having had fatiguing service to perform for the King, while the other was engaged in extensive purchases of furniture, which he was proposing to take back to his country seat, and with the aid of which he was hoping to establish in his various residences something of that court luxury of which he had caught a dazzling glimpse in his visit to his Majesty.

D'Artagnan, always faithful, finding one morning that his service allowed him a little freedom, suddenly thought of Porthos, and feeling anxious at having heard nothing from him for over a fortnight, proceeded towards his hôtel, where he caught him just getting out of bed.

The worthy baron appeared pensive — more than pensive, melancholy, in fact. He was seated half clad on the edge of his bed, with his legs hanging, contemplating a great pile of garments which littered the floor with their fringes, galoons, and embroideries, and their clashing of inharmonious colors.

Porthos, dreamy and sad as the hare of La Fontaine, did not observe D'Artagnan's entrance, which was hidden from him, moreover, at the moment by the person of M. Mouston, whose corpulence — sufficient at any time to hide one man from another — was just now doubled by the voluminous folds of a scarlet cloak which the steward was exhibiting to his master, by holding it high in the air and turning it on all sides.

D'Artagnan was arrested on the threshold by the spectacle of Porthos in a reverie ; then as the sight of the numberless garments scattered over the floor drew deep sighs from the breast of the worthy gentleman, D'Artagnan thought it time to tear him from this painful contemplation. He therefore coughed to announce his presence.

"Ah !" cried Porthos, his face lighting up with joy ; "ah ! here is D'Artagnan ! I shall now have an idea."

Mouston at these words, suspecting what was going on

behind him, drew aside with a tender smile for his master's friend, and thus removed the material obstacle which interposed between his master and D'Artagnan. Porthos' sturdy joints cracked as he rose and, crossing the chamber in two strides, pressed D'Artagnan to his heart with a warmth of affection which seemed to gain force with each passing day.

"Ah!" he repeated, "you are always welcome, dear friend, but to-day you are more so than ever."

"Well, well! there seems to be sadness here," said D'Artagnan.

Porthos replied by a look expressive of extreme dejection.

"Tell me what your trouble is, Porthos, my friend, unless it is a secret."

"In the first place, my friend," said Porthos, "you know that I have no secrets from you. This, then, is what makes me sad —"

"Wait, Porthos, until I get out of this litter of cloth, satin, and velvet."

"Oh! walk over it, walk over it," said Porthos, piteously. "It is nothing but rubbish."

"The deuce! rubbish, Porthos, — cloth at twenty livres a yard! magnificent satin, regal velvet!"

"You consider these clothes, then —"

"Superb, Porthos, superb! I wager that you are the only man in France who has so many; and even supposing you were never to have any more and were to live a hundred years, which would not surprise me, you could still wear new clothes to the day of your death, without ever needing to set eyes on a tailor from this day to that."

Porthos shook his head.

"Come, my friend, this melancholy, which does not belong to you, alarms me. My dear Porthos, let us get rid of it, and the sooner the better."

"Yes," replied Porthos, "let us be rid of it, if it is in any way possible."

"Have you had bad news from Bracieux, my dear fellow?"

"No, they have been cutting wood there, and they report the proceeds at a third above their expectation."

"Is there a dearth of fish in the Pierrefonds fish-ponds?"

"No, my friend, they have been fishing them up, and over and above what they sold there were enough to stock all the ponds in the neighborhood."

"Has the estate at Vallon been shaken by an earthquake?"

"No, my friend, on the contrary, the lightning struck a hundred paces from the château and caused a spring of water to break out in a spot hitherto dry."

"Well! what is the trouble, then?"

"The trouble is that I have received an invitation to the fête at Vaux," replied Porthos, in a lugubrious tone.

"Well, well, that is nothing to complain of! The King has caused more than a hundred heart-burnings at court by refusing invitations. Ah, really, my dear fellow, you are to be of the Vaux party? Well, well, well!"

"Oh, Lord! yes."

"It will be a magnificent sight, my friend."

"Alas! I am well aware of it."

"All that is greatest in France will be assembled there."

"Oh, Heavens!" cried Porthos, tearing his hair in desperation.

"Good Lord, are you sick? or what ails you?" said D'Artagnan.

"No, I am hale and hearty enough. It is not that."

"But what is it, then?"

"I have no clothes to wear."

D'Artagnan was petrified.

"No clothes, Porthos! no clothes!" he cried, "when I see more than fifty suits on the floor here."

"Fifty, yes, and not one that fits me."

"How so, not one that fits you? Are you not measured when you get a suit of clothes?"

"Oh, yes!" Mouston interposed, "but I have grown fat."

"You have grown fat, — what of that?"

"And so I have become bigger — oh, much bigger than M. le Baron, would you believe it, monsieur?"

"*Parbleu!* it is quite evident."

"Do you hear, imbecile!" cried Porthos, "it is quite evident."

"But still, my dear Porthos," said D'Artagnan, growing slightly impatient, "I do not understand why your clothes do not fit you because Mouston has grown stout."

"I will explain it to you," said Porthos. "You remember telling me the story of a Roman general, Antony, who always had some wild boars on the spit at once roasting at different degrees, so that he might order his dinner at any hour

of the day he pleased. Well, I resolved, since I might be summoned to court at any moment, for a week's stay, — I resolved to have seven suits of clothes ready for the occasion."

"Powerful reasoning, Porthos! only a man must have your fortune to indulge in whims like that. Without reckoning the time one loses in being measured, the fashions change so often."

"That is just the point," went on Porthos, "where I flattered myself that I had hit upon something ingenious."

"Come, let me hear it, then! *Pardieu!* I do not doubt your genius."

"You remember that Mouston was once thin?"

"Yes, in the days when he was called Mousqueton."

"But you remember also the time when he began to grow fat?"

"No, not precisely. I ask your pardon, my good Mouston."

"Oh! you are not to blame, monsieur," said Mouston, amiably. "You were in Paris then, and we were at Pierrefonds."

"In short, my dear Porthos, there was a moment when Mouston began to grow fat. That is what you mean to say, is it not?"

"Yes, my friend, and I rejoiced over it at the time."

"Bless me! I believe you did," said D'Artagnan.

"You understand," went on Porthos, "that it saved me a great deal of trouble."

"No, my dear friend, I do not understand yet; but perhaps if you explain a little —"

"I am coming to it, my friend. In the first place, as you were saying, it is always a loss of time to be measured, even if one does it but once a fortnight. And then one may be travelling, and when one wants to have seven suits of clothes always ready at once — in short, my friend, I have a horror of being measured. Deuce take it! one is a gentleman or one is not; and to be looked over by a fellow who measures you by foot, inch, and line is degrading, upon my word! These fellows find you too hollow here, too prominent there — they know your strong and your weak points. Look here! when we come out of one of those measurer's hands we are like a fortress, all whose sallies and angles have been found out by a spy."

"Really, my dear Porthos, you have notions which are all your own."

"Oh! you see when a man is an engineer —"

"And when he has fortified Belle-Isle. I see. Go on!"

"I had my idea, then, and it would doubtless have been a good one, but for M. Mouston's negligence."

D'Artagnan glanced at Mouston, who replied by a glance which seemed to say: "You will see whether I am to blame for all this!"

"I was congratulating myself, therefore, on seeing Mouston grow fat, and I even helped him as far as I could to acquire *embonpoint* by means of substantial food, hoping always that he would end by equalling me in circumference, so that he could be measured in my place."

"Ah! *corbeuf*!" cried D'Artagnan. "I understand at last, and so you could save yourself the time and the humiliation."

"Yes, *parbleu*! Judge of my delight, then, when after a year and a half of nourishment, judiciously administered, — for I took the trouble to feed him myself, — the fellow —"

"Oh! I lent a hand myself, monsieur," interposed Mouston, modestly.

"Yes, that's true. Judge of my joy, then, when I noticed one morning that Mouston was obliged to squeeze himself, just as I did, to get through the narrow secret door which those devils of architects had made in the late Madame du Vallon's chamber at my château of Pierrefonds. And by the way, speaking of that door, I want to ask you, my friend, — who know everything, — why those scoundrelly architects, who ought to carry a compass in their eye, always contrive to make doors through which only thin people can pass."

"Oh! those doors," replied D'Artagnan, "were designed for gallants, and they are apt to be tall and slender."

"Madame du Vallon had no gallants," interrupted Porthos, with majesty.

"That is perfectly true, my friend, but the architects were reckoning on the chance of your marrying again."

"Ah! that is possible," said Porthos; "and now that the secret of the narrow doors is explained to me, let us return to the subject of Mouston's fatness. But remark how the two things meet! I have always noticed that ideas run in pairs. And so observe this coincidence, D'Artagnan: I was speaking of Mouston who is fat, and that led us to Madame du Vallon —"

"Who was thin."

"Hum! Is not that prodigious?"

"My dear fellow, a learned friend of mine, M. Costar, has made the same observation that you make, only he calls it by a Greek name, which I have forgotten."

"Ah! my observation was not new, then?" cried Porthos, stupefied. "I thought it was my own discovery."

"My friend, the fact was known before Aristotle, that is to say, about two thousand years ago."

"Well, it is none the less true," said Porthos, charmed at finding himself in accord with the sages of antiquity.

"Quite right! but what if we return to Mouston, whom we left fattening before our very eyes?"

"Yes, monsieur," said Mouston.

"We are coming to it," said Porthos.

"Mouston grew fat so fast that he gratified all my hopes by reaching my size — a fact of which I convinced myself one day by seeing that rascal wearing one of my waistcoats, which he had turned into a coat, a waistcoat whose embroidery alone cost a hundred pistoles."

"I was only trying it on, monsieur," remarked Mouston.

"From that moment," proceeded Porthos, "I decided that Mouston should enter into communication with my tailors and should be measured in my name and place."

"A masterly conception, Porthos; but Mouston is a foot and a half shorter than you."

"Precisely. They measured him down to the ground, and the coat came just above my knees."

"What luck you have, Porthos! These things happen only to you."

"Ah, yes, you may well compliment me on it; there is good reason. Just at that time, that is to say, about two years and a half ago, I set out for Belle-Isle, leaving instructions with Mouston (in order that he should always have on hand a specimen of every fashion) to have a coat made for himself every month."

"And did Mouston neglect to obey your instructions? Ah, ah! that was very wrong, Mouston!"

"Quite the contrary, monsieur, quite the contrary!"

"No, he did not forget to have coats made, not he! but he entirely forgot to give me notice that he was growing fatter every day."

"Lord ! monsieur, it was not my fault ; your tailor never told me."

"And so," continued Porthos, "the rascal has gone on for the last two years, gaining eighteen inches in circumference, and so my last dozen coats are too large for me in regular progression, by from one foot to a foot and a half."

"But the others, those which were made when you were more nearly of the same size ?"

"They are entirely out of fashion, my dear friend, so that if I were to put them on I should look as if I had just arrived from Siam and had been absent from court for years."

"I understand your predicament ; you have how many new coats — thirty-six ? and yet you have not one ! Well, you must have a thirty-seventh made, and the other thirty-six will be for Mouston."

"Ah, monsieur !" cried Mouston, with a gratified air, "you have always been kind to me."

"*Parbleu !* do you think that idea did not occur to me too, or that the expense deterred me ? Not at all ; but it wants only two days to the fête at Vaux. I received the invitation yesterday, I ordered Mouston to post hither at once with my wardrobe, and I only discovered my misfortune this very morning. From now until the day after to-morrow there is not a tailor, at all in the mode, who will undertake to make me a suit."

"That is to say, a suit covered with gold, you mean ?"

"Yes, I want gold all over it !"

"We will manage that. You will not start for three days yet. The invitations are for Wednesday, and this is Sunday morning."

"That is true ; but Aramis advised me to be at Vaux twenty-four hours beforehand."

"Hum ! Aramis ?"

"Yes, it was Aramis who brought me the invitation."

"Ah ! to be sure, I understand you are invited on the part of M. Fouquet."

"Not at all ! on the part of the King, my dear friend. The note reads at full length :

"M. le Baron du Vallon is informed that the King has deigned to place him on the list of those invited —"

"Very good ! But it is with M. Fouquet that you are going ?"

"And when I think," cried Porthos, stamping the floor, "when I think that I shall have no clothes to wear, I could burst with rage. I should like to break something or to strangle somebody."

"Do not strangle any one or break anything, Porthos; I shall arrange all that; put on one of your thirty-six suits and come with me to a tailor's."

"Bah! my footman has seen them all this morning."

"Even M. Percerin?"

"Who is M. Percerin?"

"He is tailor to the King, *parbleu!*"

"Oh! yes, yes," said Porthos, who wished to appear to know the King's tailor, whose name he now heard for the first time, "to M. Percerin, the King's tailor, by all means. I thought he would be far too busy."

"Doubtless he will be too busy; but be at ease, Porthos; he will do for me what he would do for no one else. Only you will have to let yourself be measured, my friend."

"Ah!" exclaimed Porthos, with a sigh, "that is annoying, but what can I do?"

"Upon my word! you will have to do as others do, my friend; as the King himself does."

"What! they measure the King? and he submits to it?"

"The King is a coxcomb, my friend, and so are you, however much you may deny it."

Porthos smiled with a conquering air.

"Let us go to the King's tailor, then," he said, "and since he measures the King, my faith! he may measure me."

CHAPTER XXX.

SHOWING WHO MESSIRE JEAN PERCERIN WAS.

MESSIRE JEAN PERCERIN, tailor to his Majesty, occupied a somewhat large house in the Rue Saint-Honoré, near the Rue de l'Arbre-Sec. He was a man with a great taste for beautiful stuffs, embroideries, and velvets, and whose family had furnished tailors to the king for several generations. The succession reached back to Charles IX., from whose reign, as is well

known, dated fashions of bravery in apparel difficult enough to satisfy.

The Percerin of those days had been a Huguenot, like Ambrose Paré, and had been spared through the intercession of the Queen of Navarre, the beautiful Margot, as she was called at that time, — and that because he was the only one who had ever succeeded in making her those wonderful riding habits which she loved to wear, seeing that they were adapted to hide certain defects in anatomy which the Queen of Navarre was anxious to conceal.

Percerin, having escaped with his life, designed, out of gratitude, certain black bodices very inexpensively for Queen Catherine, who ended by being greatly pleased at the preservation of this Huguenot, whom she had long looked upon sourly enough. But Percerin was a prudent man; he had heard it said that nothing was more dangerous for a Huguenot than the smiles of Queen Catherine; and having observed that she smiled upon him more than was her custom, he made haste to turn Catholic, he and all his family; and having become irreproachable by this conversion, he attained speedily to the high position of master tailor to the crown of France.

Under Henri III., a coxcomb among kings, this position became as exalted as the highest peak of the Cordilleras. Percerin had been a clever man all his life, and in order to keep up this reputation beyond the grave, he took care to spoil nothing by his death; he therefore expired very adroitly just at the moment when his imagination began to decline.

He left a son and daughter, both worthy of the name they bore; the son a cutter, as bold and unerring as the square rule; the daughter skilful at embroidery and designing ornaments.

The wedding of Henri IV. and Marie de Médicis, and the sumptuous court mourning for the said queen, together with a few words of approval let fall by M. de Bassompierre, the king of dandies at that period, made the fortune of the second generation of Percerins.

M. Concino Concini and his wife Galigai, who shone later at the court of France, sought to Italianize the fashions by introducing Florentine tailors; but Percerin, touched to the quick both in his patriotism and his self-esteem, reduced these foreigners to mere ciphers by his designs in brocatelle, and his inimitable feather-stitch embroidery, so effectually that Concini was the first to renounce his compatriots, and held the French

tailor in such esteem that he would consent to be dressed by no other, and was consequently clad in one of his doublets on the day when Vitry's pistol ended his career on the Pont du Louvre. It was this very doublet emanating from Maître Percerin's work-shop which the Parisians took so much pleasure in hacking to pieces, together with the human flesh inside it.

In spite of the favor which Percerin had enjoyed with Concini, King Louis XIII. was generous enough to bear his tailor no malice and to retain him in his service. At the moment when Louis the Just gave this great example of equity, Percerin had two sons growing up, one of whom made his début at the wedding of Anne of Austria, invented that splendid Spanish costume in which Cardinal Richelieu danced a saraband, made the costumes for the tragedy of "Mirame," and stitched upon Buckingham's mantle those famous pearls which he was to scatter over the floor of the Louvre.

It is easy to become illustrious when one has dressed M. de Buckingham, M. de Cinq-Mars, Mademoiselle Ninon, M. de Beaufort, and Marion de Lorme. Thus Percerin III. had attained the pinnacle of glory when his father died.

This same Percerin III., grown old, famous, and rich, was still dressing Louis XIV., and having no son, — which was a great grief to him, seeing that with him his dynasty would end, — was bringing out several promising pupils. He owned a carriage, a country seat, the tallest lackeys in Paris, and, by special authority from Louis XIV., a pack of hounds. He dressed MM. de Lyonne and Letellier by a sort of patronage; but politic as he was, and versed in state secrets, he had never succeeded in fitting a coat for M. Colbert. This cannot be explained, but the reason may be guessed at. Great minds live upon intuitions, they act without knowing why. The great Percerin — for, contrary to the rule of dynasties, it was above all the last of the Percerins who had merited the surname of the Great — could cut by inspiration a petticoat for the queen or a pair of breeches for the King, he could invent a cloak for Monsieur or a clocked stocking for Madame, but in spite of his unrivalled genius he could never hit the measure of M. Colbert.

"That man," he used to say, "is beyond my art, and I can never see him in the designs of my needle."

It is needless to say that Percerin was M. Fouquet's tailor, and that the superintendent valued him highly.

M. Percerin was nearly eighty years of age, yet he was still fresh, and at the same time so dry that the courtiers said he was actually brittle. His fortune and renown were great enough for M. le Prince, that king of fops, to take him by the arm when chatting over the fashions with him, and for those among the courtiers least eager in paying their bills, never to venture running behindhand in settling with him; for Maître Percerin would make a suit the first time on credit, but never a second, if he were not paid for the first.

It may be imagined that such a tailor, instead of running after customers, made difficulties about receiving new ones. Thus Percerin refused to fit *bourgeois*, or newly-made nobles. It was even rumored that M. de Mazarin, in return for a ceremonial suit of cardinal's vestments, had slipped one fine day a patent of nobility into his pocket.

Percerin was full of wit and roguery, and of a sprightly humor. At the age of eighty he could still take with a steady hand the measure of a lady's bodice.

It was to the house of this great artist that D'Artagnan was taking the dejected Porthos; the latter was saying to his friend as they went along:

"Take care, my dear D'Artagnan, do not compromise the dignity of a man like myself with the arrogance of this Percerin, who is doubtless very impertinent, for I give you warning that if he is wanting in respect to me, I shall chastise him."

"Presented by me," replied D'Artagnan, "you have nothing to fear, dear friend; even if you were — what you are not."

"Ah! but you see —"

"What is it? Come, Porthos, have you anything against Percerin?"

"It seems to me that I once sent Mouston to a fellow of that name —"

"Well, what of it?"

"And that the fellow actually refused to fit me."

"Oh! a misunderstanding, no doubt, which we will hasten to clear up. Mouston made some mistake."

"Perhaps so."

"He may have confused one name with another —"

"It may be; that rascal of a Mouston never could remember names."

"I take it all upon myself."

"Very good!"

"Stop the carriage, Porthos, here we are!"

"It is here? How can that be? We are at the Halles, and you told me his house was at the corner of the Rue de l'Arbre-Sec."

"That is true; but look!"

"Well, I am looking, and I see —"

"What?"

"That we are at the Halles, *pardieu!*"

"But you certainly do not want our horses to climb over the carriage ahead of us."

"No."

"Nor the carriage which precedes us to scramble over the one ahead."

"Still less."

"Nor that the next carriage should ride over the thirty or forty others that have got here before us."

"On my faith! you are right; what a mob, friend, what a mob!"

"Is it not?"

"And what are they doing, all these people?"

"Oh! it is easy to see, they are waiting their turn."

"Bah! Have the comedians of the Hôtel de Bourgogne changed their quarters?"

"No — I mean their turn to enter at M. Percerin's."

"But are we obliged to wait here too?"

"No; we will show ourselves more ingenious and less proud than these others."

"What shall we do, then?"

"We will get down, slip between the lackeys and pages, and enter the tailor's house; I answer for it, especially if you go first."

"Come on, then," said Porthos, and both alighting proceeded on foot towards M. Percerin's house. The cause of all this crowd was that the door was closed, and that a lackey standing before it was explaining to the illustrious customers of the illustrious tailor that at the moment M. Percerin could receive no one. It was bruited about in the throng, on the strength of what the tall lackey had said in confidence to one of the great nobles whom he wished to oblige, — it was reported that M. Percerin was engaged upon five suits for the King, and that in consideration of the urgency of the case,

he was closeted in his private room, meditating over the color, the cut, and the trimmings of these five suits.

Some, satisfied with this reason, were departing, happy to repeat it to others; but a greater number, more tenacious, were insisting upon the doors being opened, and among them were three knights of the *Cordon-bleu*, selected to take part in a ballet, which was sure to be a failure unless their three costumes were designed by the great Percerin himself.

D'Artagnan, pushing Porthos before him, broke through the throng and reached the counters behind which the tailors' assistants were striving their utmost to answer questions. We omitted to say that at the door they had tried to turn away Porthos like the rest, but D'Artagnan, showing himself, had merely pronounced these words: "The King's order," and instantly he and his friend had been admitted. The poor devils at the counters were doing their best to respond to the demands of the customers in their master's absence, suspending their stitches to make an excuse; and when wounded pride or disappointment turned on them too fiercely, the one who was attacked made a dive and disappeared under the counter.

The procession of disappointed lords was a picture full of curious details. Our captain of musketeers, a man of rapid and close observation, took it all in at a glance. But having run over the groups, his eye rested upon a man in front of him. This man, seated on a stool, scarcely showed his head above the counter which sheltered him. He was about forty years of age, with a pale face, a melancholy expression, and soft, luminous eyes. He was gazing at D'Artagnan and the rest, with his chin upon his hand, like a calm, inquiring observer. Only on perceiving and doubtless recognizing our captain, he drew his hat down over his eyes. It was perhaps this gesture that attracted D'Artagnan's attention; if so, the man who had pulled down his hat had brought about a result quite different from what he had proposed.

For the rest, his costume was simple and his hair so plainly dressed that unobservant customers might have taken him for a mere tailor's apprentice, bending over the board and carefully stitching cloth or velvet.

However, the man's head was too often in the air for his fingers to work very profitably. D'Artagnan was not duped, and he saw that if this man were at work it was certainly not upon cloth.

"Eh!" he cried, addressing him, "so you have become a tailor's boy, M. Molière!"

"Hush, M. d'Artagnan," replied the man, softly. "Hush, in Heaven's name, or I shall be recognized."

"And pray, what would be the harm?"

"There would be no harm, truly, but —"

"But there would be no good either, you mean to say?"

"Alas! no, for I assure you I was engaged in observing some very surprising figures."

"Go on, go on, M. Molière! I understand the interest you find in this sort of thing and — I will not disturb you in your studies."

"I thank you."

"But upon one condition — that you will tell me where M. Percerin really is."

"Oh! willingly, he is in his private room, only —"

"Only that one cannot enter it."

"It is quite unapproachable."

"To every one?"

"To every one. He brought me in here so that I might carry on my observations at my ease, and then he left me."

"Well, my dear M. Molière, you will go and tell him that I am here, will you not?"

"I?" cried Molière, like a dog whose bone is being snatched from him. "I leave my good place? Oh! M. d'Artagnan, how ill you are treating me!"

"If you do not at once let M. Percerin know that I am here, my dear M. Molière," said D'Artagnan, in a low voice, "I warn you of one thing, I shall never introduce you to my friend here."

Molière indicated Porthos by an imperceptible gesture.

"This gentleman, you mean?" he said.

"Yes."

Molière fixed upon Porthos one of those looks which search a man's brain and heart. The scrutiny, doubtless, seemed to him big with promise, for he rose immediately and proceeded into the adjoining chamber.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SAMPLES.

DURING this time the crowd had been oscillating slowly backward and forward before the counters, leaving at each corner a murmur or a menace, as the waves deposit foam and bits of seaweed on the sands while they recede with the ebbing tide.

After the lapse of ten minutes or so, Molière reappeared and motioned to D'Artagnan from beneath the hangings. The latter hurried after him, dragging Porthos along through winding corridors till they reached M. Percerin's room. The old man, with his sleeves rolled up, was laying in folds a beautiful piece of gold-flowered brocade, the better to bring out its lustre. On perceiving D'Artagnan he put the stuff aside and came forward to greet him, without rapture or even excessive courtesy, but civilly enough.

"M. le Capitaine, you will excuse me, I am sure, for I am engaged."

"Oh, yes, upon the King's costumes, M. Percerin. You are making three, I am told."

"Five, my dear monsieur, five!"

"Three or five, it is all the same to me, Maître Percerin, but I know that you will make them the most beautiful in the world."

"Oh, yes, it is well known, once made they will be the most beautiful in the world. I do not deny it, but in order to be the most beautiful they must be made, and to do that, monsieur, I am pressed for time."

"Ah, bah! two days still. That is far more than you need, M. Percerin," said D'Artagnan, with the greatest coolness.

Percerin raised his head with the air of a man little used to being opposed, even in his caprices; but D'Artagnan paid no attention to the airs which the illustrious tailor of brocades was beginning to assume.

"My dear M. Percerin," he went on, "I have brought you a customer."

"Ah, indeed!" exclaimed Percerin, in a surly tone.

"M. le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds," continued D'Artagnan.

Percerin made a half-bow, which found no favor with the terrible Porthos, who, ever since his entrance, had been regarding the tailor askance.

"One of my good friends," added D'Artagnan.

"I will wait upon monsieur," said Percerin, "but later."

"Later? But when?"

"When I have time."

"You have already said that to my valet," broke in Porthos, in high dudgeon.

"Very possibly. I am always pressed for time."

"My friend," replied Porthos, sententiously, "we can always find time if we choose."

Percerin turned crimson, which, in an old man white with age, is a very bad sign.

"Faith," he said, "monsieur is quite at liberty to give his custom elsewhere."

"Come, come, Percerin!" interposed D'Artagnan, "you are not very accommodating to-day. But I will say one word which will bring you to your knees. Monsieur is not only a friend of mine, but a friend of M. Fouquet's."

"Ah, ah!" exclaimed the tailor, "that is another matter." Then turning to Porthos: "M. le Baron is M. Fouquet's —"

"I am myself," roared Porthos, just at the moment when the tapestries were drawn aside to admit another auditor of this scene.

Molière was observing; D'Artagnan was laughing; Porthos was swearing.

"My dear Percerin," said D'Artagnan, "you will make a suit for the baron. I ask you myself."

"I will not refuse you, M. le Capitaine."

"But that is not all. You will make it for him at once."

"Impossible before a week hence."

"In that case you might as well refuse outright, for the suit is wanted for the fête at Vaux."

"I repeat that it is impossible," replied the obstinate old man.

"Not so, dear M. Percerin, especially if I ask you," spoke a low voice in the doorway, — a low-toned, yet metallic voice, — which caused D'Artagnan to prick up his ears, for it was the voice of Aramis.

"M. d'Herblay!" cried the tailor.

"Aramis!" muttered D'Artagnan.

"Ah, our bishop!" exclaimed Porthos.

"Good-day, D'Artagnan; good-day, Porthos; good-day, dear friends!" said Aramis. "Come, come, dear M. Percerin; make the baron's suit, and I promise you that in doing so you will be pleasing M. Fouquet," and he accompanied these words with a gesture which said, "Consent, and dismiss them." It appeared that Aramis had a greater influence over M. Percerin than D'Artagnan even, for the tailor bowed in token of assent, and turning to Porthos:

"Go and have your measure taken on the other side," he said rudely.

Porthos colored in a formidable manner.

D'Artagnan saw the storm coming, and addressing Molière in an undertone said:

"My dear monsieur, the man whom you see before you considers himself degraded if any one presumes to measure the flesh and bones which Heaven has bestowed on him. Study the type, Master Aristophanes, and make your profit out of it."

Molière did not need encouragement. He was devouring Baron Porthos with his eyes.

"Monsieur," he said to him, "if you will be pleased to come with me, I shall see that you are measured without the measurer's touching you."

"Oh!" cried Porthos, "how do you make that out, friend?"

"I tell you that they shall apply neither yard-stick nor foot-rule to your seams. It is a new method we have invented for measuring persons of quality whose sensibility revolts at being touched by low-born fellows. We have susceptible customers who will not allow themselves to be measured, a ceremony which, in my opinion, wounds the natural dignity of man; so if by chance, monsieur, you should be one of those people —"

"*Corbæuf!* I believe I am!"

"Very well, it is a lucky chance, then, M. le Baron; you can enjoy the first-fruits of our new invention."

"But how the devil do you manage it?" exclaimed Porthos, enchanted.

"Monsieur," said Molière, bowing, "if you will deign to follow me, you shall see."

Aramis was observing this scene with all his eyes. Perhaps he fancied, from D'Artagnan's animation, that the musketeer

was about to follow Porthos, in order not to lose the end of a scene which began so well. But clear-sighted as he was, Aramis was mistaken; Porthos and Molière went out alone, while D'Artagnan remained with Percerin. Why was this? Simply from curiosity; probably also for the sake of enjoying for a few moments longer the society of his good friend Aramis. As Molière and Porthos disappeared, D'Artagnan drew near the Bishop of Vannes, — a proceeding which seemed particularly to annoy the latter.

"You are having a suit made also, dear friend?"

Aramis smiled. "No," he replied.

"But you are going to Vaux, are you not?"

"I am going, but without a new suit. You forget, dear D'Artagnan, that a poor bishop of Vannes is not rich enough to have new clothes for every fête."

"Bah!" said the musketeer, laughing, "and how about the new poems — do we make those no longer?"

"Oh, D'Artagnan!" cried Aramis, "I have long given up all such frivolities."

"Good!" returned D'Artagnan, only half convinced.

As for Percerin, he had relapsed into the contemplation of his brocades.

"Do you not perceive," said Aramis, smiling, "that we are boring this good man sadly, my dear D'Artagnan?"

"Ah! ah!" murmured the musketeer to himself, "that is to say that I am boring you, my friend." Then aloud:

"Come, then, let us go; I have no further business here, and if you are as free as I, dear Aramis —"

"No; I was intending —"

"Oh, you had something private to say to Percerin? Why did you not tell me so at once?"

"Something private?" repeated Aramis. "Yes, certainly, but not from you, D'Artagnan. Never, I beg you to believe me, could I have anything so private to say that a friend like you might not hear it."

"Oh! no, no, I shall retire," insisted D'Artagnan, but in a tone of evident curiosity; for Aramis' embarrassment, however well-disguised, had not escaped him; and he was aware that in this impenetrable mind everything, however apparently futile, tended towards a given end — an unknown end, but one which from the knowledge he had of his friend's character, the musketeer knew to be of the highest importance.

Aramis, who on his side saw that D'Artagnan had his suspicions, insisted the more.

"Stay! I entreat you," he said; "this is what it is." Then turning to the tailor: "My good Percerin —" he continued, "I am, in fact, particularly glad you are here, D'Artagnan."

"Oh! indeed," rejoined the Gascon, even less duped this time than before. Percerin did not move; Aramis aroused him violently by snatching from his hands the brocade over which he was lost in contemplation.

"My dear Percerin," he said, "I have M. le Brun here, one of M. Fouquet's painters."

"Ah, very good!" thought D'Artagnan; "but why Le Brun?"

Aramis looked at D'Artagnan, who appeared absorbed in the study of some engravings of Mark Antony.

"And you wish to have a costume made for him like those of the Epicureans?" asked Percerin, and while saying this absently, the worthy tailor was trying to recapture his piece of brocade.

"An Epicurean's costume?" asked D'Artagnan with curiosity.

"I see," said Aramis with his most winning smile; "it is decreed that our dear D'Artagnan shall learn all our secrets this evening. You have doubtless heard of M. Fouquet's Epicureans?"

"Certainly. It is a sort of poetical academy, is it not? of which La Fontaine, Loret, Pélisson, Molière, and I know not who else, are members, and which holds its sittings at Saint-Mandé?"

"That is it precisely. Well, we are about to give our poets a uniform and enroll them in the King's service."

"Oh! I understand! a surprise which M. Fouquet is preparing for the King? You may be quite at ease; if that is M. le Brun's secret I shall not betray it."

"You are always charming, my friend. No, M. le Brun has nothing to do with this matter; the secret which concerns him is of much greater importance."

"If it is so important as all that, I prefer not to know it," said D'Artagnan, making a feint of departing.

"Come in, M. le Brun, come in!" said Aramis, opening a side door with his right hand, while with the left he held D'Artagnan back.

"Faith! I understand nothing of this," said Percerin.

Aramis took his cue, as they say on the stage, then went on :

"My dear M. Percerin, you are making five costumes for the King, are you not ? one of brocade, one in hunting cloth, one in velvet, one in satin, and one of a Florentine stuff ? "

"Yes, but how did you know all that, monseigneur ? " demanded Percerin, in stupefaction.

"That is very simple, my dear monsieur, there is to be a hunt, a banquet, a concert, a promenade, and a reception ; those are the five suits required by etiquette."

"You know everything, monseigneur ! "

"Yes, and a great deal more besides," murmured D'Artagnan.

"But," cried the tailor in triumph, "what you do not know, monseigneur, prince of the church though you are, — what no one will know beforehand besides the King, Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and myself, — is the color of the stuffs, and the style of ornament, — is the cut, the ensemble, the effect of the whole thing ! "

"Precisely ! and that is what I have come to ask you to tell me, my dear M. Percerin," said Aramis.

"Ah, bah ! " cried the tailor in consternation, although Aramis had pronounced these words in his softest and most honeyed tones. The request appeared on reflection so exaggerated, so ridiculous, so monstrous to M. Percerin, that he laughed first to himself, then aloud, and finally burst into a shout of laughter. D'Artagnan joined in, not that he found the matter so profoundly ludicrous, but in order not to allow Aramis to grow cool. The latter let them laugh their fill, and when they had quieted down somewhat :

"At first view," he said, "I appear to be hazarding an absurdity ; but D'Artagnan, who is wisdom incarnate, will tell you that I could not do otherwise than to ask this."

"Let us see ! " said the musketeer, growing attentive, for he perceived, with his keen intuition, that what had gone before had been a mere skirmish, and that the moment of battle was approaching.

"Let us see ! " said Percerin, incredulously.

"Why, then, is M. Fouquet giving a fête for the King ? " pursued Aramis ; "is it not in order to please him ? "

"Undoubtedly," assented Percerin.

D'Artagnan nodded.

"By every sort of gallantry, by ingenious devices and a series of surprises, such as enrolling our Epicureans in his service?"

"Most assuredly!"

"Well, here is one of the surprises, my good friend. M. le Brun, here, is a man who draws to perfection."

"Yes," said Percerin, "I have seen some of monsieur's pictures, and I remarked how well the costumes were handled. That is why I agreed at once to make him a suit either like that of the Epicureans, or quite his own."

"Dear monsieur, we accept your offer, we shall avail ourselves of it later; but for the moment M. le Brun requires, not the clothes you are making for him, but those you are making for the King."

Percerin gave a backward leap of horror, which D'Artagnan, calm and measured as he habitually was, did not regard as excessive, in view of Aramis' strange and startling proposition.

"The King's garments! That I should give to any one in this world the King's garments! Oh! this time, monseigneur, your Grace is certainly mad!" cried the poor tailor, driven to extremities.

"Come to my assistance, D'Artagnan," pursued Aramis, more and more calm and smiling; "help me to persuade monsieur, for you doubtless understand me."

"Eh, eh! Not too well I must admit."

"What, my friend! You do not understand that M. Fouquet wishes to give the King the delightful surprise of finding his portrait at Vaux on his arrival; and that the portrait, which will be a striking likeness, must be dressed precisely as the King will be on the day the portrait first sees the light."

"Oh! yes, yes," cried the musketeer, well-nigh convinced, so plausible was Aramis' reasoning. "Yes, you are right; the idea is an ingenious one. I will wager that it is your own, Aramis."

"I hardly know," replied the prelate, carelessly; "mine or M. Fouquet's." Then scanning Percerin's face, after having noticed D'Artagnan's indecision:

"Well, M. Percerin," he inquired, "what do you say to it? Let us hear."

"I say that —"

"That you are at liberty to refuse, doubtless. I am well aware of it, and have no intention of constraining you, my

dear monsieur. I will go further, and say that I appreciate your delicacy in not wishing to forestall M. Fouquet's wish. You dread appearing to flatter the King. A noble spirit, M. Percerin! A noble spirit!"

The tailor could only stammer something.

"It would, in truth, be a superb flattery to offer the young prince," went on Aramis. "But as M. le Surintendant said to me: 'If Percerin should refuse it will not lower him in the least in my opinion, and I shall always esteem him highly. Only —'"

"Only?" echoed Percerin, with anxiety.

"'Only,'" pursued Aramis, "'I shall be obliged to say to the King' (you understand, my dear M. Percerin, that these are M. Fouquet's words), 'only I shall be forced to say to the King: "Sire, it was my intention to present to your Majesty a likeness of yourself, but through a feeling of delicacy, exaggerated, perhaps, but creditable, M. Percerin opposed it."'"

"Opposed it!" cried the tailor, in consternation at the responsibility thrown upon him. "I oppose anything which M. Fouquet desires, when it is a question of pleasing the King! Oh, what an ugly word you have uttered, mon-seigneur! Oppose! It is not I who said it, thank Heaven! I take M. le Capitaine to witness. Is it true, M. d'Artagnan, that I have opposed anything?"

D'Artagnan made a gesture intimating that he preferred to remain neutral. He felt that there was some intrigue beneath all this, whether comedy or tragedy. He cursed himself inwardly for not being able to fathom it, but in the meantime he wished to keep clear of the matter.

But already Percerin, goaded by the idea of the King being told that he had opposed an agreeable surprise intended for his Majesty, had drawn up a chair for Le Brun, and was busy taking down from a wardrobe four magnificent costumes, the fifth being still in the workmen's hands; and these masterpieces he fitted upon four lay figures brought to France in the time of Concini, and given to Percerin II. by Maréchal d'Ancre after the discomfiture of the Italian tailors.

The painter set about drawing the figures, and then proceeded to color them; but Aramis, who was following with his eyes every phase of the work, suddenly stopped him.

"I fear you have not caught the tone, my dear M. le Brun; your colors deceive you, and we shall not get on canvas that

perfect resemblance which is indispensable; you need time to study the various tints more closely."

"That is true," said Percerin, "but time is lacking, and you will acknowledge, monseigneur, that I cannot help that."

"Then the affair will be a failure," said Aramis, tranquilly, "and that owing to want of truth in the colors."

Nevertheless Le Brun went on copying the stuffs and ornaments with absolute fidelity — a proceeding which Aramis saw with ill-concealed impatience.

"Come, come, what devil of an imbroglio are they playing here?" the musketeer went on asking himself.

"Evidently this will never do!" said Aramis. "M. le Brun, you may as well close your paint-box and roll up your canvas."

"For that matter, monsieur," cried the painter, in vexation, "the light is abominable here."

"An idea! M. le Brun, an idea! If we had a sample of the stuffs, for example, and you could take time and have a better light —"

"Oh, then," cried Le Brun, "I would answer for the result."

"Good!" said D'Artagnan to himself. "This must be the key to the whole performance. They want a sample of each of the stuffs. *Mordieux!* Will this Percerin give it to them?"

Meanwhile Percerin, beaten in his last stronghold, a dupe, besides, of Aramis, feigned good nature, cut off five samples, and handed them to the bishop of Vannes.

"That will be far better. Is it not your opinion, too?" said Aramis to D'Artagnan.

"My opinion, my dear Aramis," said D'Artagnan, "is that you are always yourself."

"And consequently always your friend," said the bishop, in his most engaging tones.

"Yes, yes," said D'Artagnan, aloud. Then in a low voice: "If I must be your dupe, double Jesuit, at least I will not be your accomplice; and in order not to be your accomplice I must get out of here at once. Adieu, Aramis," he added aloud, "I am going to rejoin Porthos."

"Wait for me, then," replied Aramis, pocketing his samples, "for I have done here, and I should not be sorry to speak a last word with our friend."

Le Brun packed away his paints, Percerin hung the suits in the wardrobe again, Aramis felt in his pocket to make sure that the samples were safe, and they all left the room.

CHAPTER XXXII.

WHERE MOLIERE PERCHANCE BORROWED HIS FIRST IDEA FOR THE "BOURGEOIS GENTILHOMME."

D'ARTAGNAN found Porthos in the adjoining chamber ; no longer an irritated, disappointed Porthos, however, but a radiant, blooming, charming Porthos, engaged in friendly chat with Molière, who was gazing at him with a sort of idolatry, like a man who not only had never seen his better but had never seen his equal.

Aramis went straight up to Porthos and held out his delicate white hand, which was swallowed up in the huge hand of his old friend, an operation which Aramis never ventured on without a certain anxiety. But this time, the amicable pressure having been endured without too much suffering, the bishop of Vannes turned to Molière.

"Well, monsieur," he said, "will you come with me to Saint-Mandé?"

"I will go wherever you wish, monseigneur," replied Molière.

"To Saint-Mandé!" cried Porthos, amazed at seeing the proud bishop of Vannes fraternizing with a tailor's assistant. "What, Aramis, you are taking this gentleman to Saint-Mandé?"

"Yes," said Aramis, with a smile, "our time is short."

"Besides, my dear Porthos," added D'Artagnan, "M. Molière is not precisely what he appears to be."

"How is that?" asked Porthos.

"Why, monsieur is one of Maître Percerin's chief clerks; and he is expected at Saint-Mandé to try on the costumes which M. Fouquet has ordered for the Epicureans."

"Yes, monsieur," said Molière, "that is it precisely."

"Come, then, dear M. Molière," said Aramis, "if you are quite done with M. du Vallon."

"We have finished," replied Porthos.

"And you are satisfied?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Perfectly satisfied," assented Porthos.

Molière then took leave of Porthos, with profuse salutations, and grasped the hand which the musketeer held out to him furtively.

"Monsieur," concluded Porthos, simpering, "be punctual, above all, I beg of you."

"You shall have your suit by to-morrow, M. le Baron," replied Molière, and he departed with Aramis; whereupon D'Artagnan, taking Porthos by the arm, asked him:

"What has this tailor done to you, my dear Porthos, to make you so enchanted with him?"

"What has he done for me? What has he done?" cried Porthos with enthusiasm.

"Yes, I ask you what has he done?"

"My friend, he has succeeded in doing what no tailor ever did before: he has taken my measures without touching me."

"Ah, bah! tell me all about it."

"In the first place, my friend, they produced from I know not where a series of lay-figures of all sizes, hoping that there would be one to suit mine; but the largest of all — which was that of the drum-major of the Swiss Guard — was two inches too short and half a foot too thin."

"Ah! really?"

"It is just as I have the honor of telling you, D'Artagnan. But he is a great man, or at least a great tailor, that M. Molière. He was not the least in the world put out by that."

"And what did he do then?"

"Oh, a very simple thing. It is incredible, upon my word! How could they have been so dull as not to discover this method before? What pain and humiliation it would have spared me!"

"Not to mention the suits of clothes, my dear Porthos."

"Yes, thirty suits."

"Well! but let us hear this method of M. Molière's."

"Molière? That is what you call him, is it? I am particularly set on remembering his name."

"Yes; or Poquelin, if you prefer it."

"No, I prefer Molière; when I wish to recall his name, I shall think of volière,¹ and as I have one at Pierrefonds —"

"That will be an excellent way, my friend; and what about M. Molière's method?"

"This is it. Instead of tearing me limb from limb, as all those scoundrels do, making me bend my back and double my joints, — all of them low and degrading practices —"

D'Artagnan nodded affirmatively.

“ ‘Monsieur,’ he said to me,” went on Porthos, “ ‘a gentleman ought to measure himself; oblige me by drawing near to this mirror.’ So I drew near the mirror. I must admit that I did not know precisely what this good M. Volière wanted of me — ”

“ Molière.”

“ Oh, yes, yes! Molière. And as the fear of being measured was still upon me, ‘take care,’ I said to him, ‘what you are going to do to me; I am very touchy, I warn you.’ But he replied in his soft voice (for he is a civil lad, we must admit) — he with his soft voice replied: ‘Monsieur, if your coat is to fit you, it must be made according to your figure. Now, your figure is exactly reflected in this mirror, and we are going to take the measure of your reflection.’ ”

“ It is evident,” said D’Artagnan, “that you could see yourself in a mirror; but where did you find one large enough for you to see your whole figure? ”

“ My friend, it is the very mirror in which the King looks at himself.”

“ Yes, but the King is a foot and a half shorter than you.”

“ Well, I do not know how that may be; it is doubtless a way they have of flattering the King — but the mirror was too large for me. To be sure, the height was produced by three Venetian glasses, superposed one on the other, and the breadth by their juxtaposition.”

“ Oh, my friend, what admirable words you are employing there! Where the devil did you collect them? ”

“ At Belle-Isle. Aramis explained them to the architect.”

“ Oh, very good! Now let us go back to the mirror.”

“ Then this worthy M. Volière — ”

“ Molière.”

“ Yes, Molière, exactly! You will see, my friend, that henceforth I shall remember his name only too well. This worthy M. Molière then began to trace lines on the mirror with a piece of Spanish chalk, following the shape of my arms and my shoulders, and all the while expounding this maxim: ‘a coat should never incommode the wearer.’ ”

“ That is certainly a fine maxim,” remarked D’Artagnan, “but one which is not always put in practice.”

“ That is why I found it all the more amazing, especially since he expatiated upon it.”

“ Ah, he expatiated! ”

“ *Parbleu!* ”

"Let us hear his exposition."

"‘Seeing that,’ he went on, ‘in an awkward situation, or under embarrassing circumstances, one might have one’s coat on one’s back, and not wish to take off one’s coat —’"

"That is true," said D’Artagnan.

"‘And so,’ proceeded M. Volière —"

"Molière."

"Molière, yes; ‘And so,’ proceeded M. Molière, ‘you may wish to draw your sword, monsieur, and you have your coat on your back. What do you do?’ ‘I take it off,’ I answered. ‘Oh, not at all,’ he replied in his turn. ‘How, not at all?’ ‘I say that the coat must be so well made that it does not impede you in the least, even in drawing your sword.’ ‘Ah, ah!’ ‘Put yourself on guard!’ he went on. I fell into position with such force that two panes of glass burst out of the window. ‘That is nothing, nothing,’ said he, ‘keep your position.’ I raised my left arm in the air, the forearm gracefully bent, the ruffle drooping, and the wrist curved, while my right arm, half extended, protected my waist with the elbow and my chest with the wrist."

"Yes," said D’Artagnan, "'t is the true guard, the academic guard."

"You have said the word, dear friend. During this time, Volière —"

"Molière!"

"Look you, my friend! I decidedly prefer to call him — what did you say was his other name?"

"Poquelin."

"I prefer to call him Poquelin."

"And how will you remember this name better than the other?"

"Well, you see, — the name is Poquelin, is it not?"

"Yes."

"I shall call to mind Madame Coquenard."

"Good!"

"And by merely changing *Coque* to *Poque*, and *nard* to *lin*, instead of Coquenard, I shall have Poquelin."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed D’Artagnan, in amazement. "Go on, my friend, I am listening with admiration."

"This Coquelin, then, was sketching my arm on the mirror —"

"Pardon me — Poquelin."

"What did I say?"

"You said Coquelin."

"Ah! so I did. Well, this Poquelin was sketching my arm on the glass, but he was taking his time about it; he looked at me frequently; the truth is that I presented a fine appearance. 'Does this tire you?' he asked. 'A little,' I replied, stooping slightly at the thighs; 'but I could hold out an hour longer.' 'No, no, I will not permit it!' he cried; 'we have some willing lads here who will make it their duty to hold up your arms, as they held up those of the prophets of old when they were invoking the Lord.' 'Very good!' I replied. 'That will not humiliate you?' 'My friend,' I said to him, 'there is a great difference, it seems to me, between being supported and being measured.'"

"A very sensible distinction," interposed D'Artagnan.

"Thereupon," proceeded Porthos, "he made a sign, and two lads approached; one held up my right arm, while the other, with infinite address, supported my left arm. 'A third boy!' he cried; a third approached. 'Support monsieur at the waist,' he said. The boy held me up at the waist."

"And so you rested?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Perfectly, and Poquenard drew me on the glass."

"Poquelin, my friend."

"Poquelin, you are right — Hold! I decidedly prefer to call him Volière."

"Do so, then, and let us be done with it."

"During all this time Volière was drawing me on the mirror."

"'T was very polite in him."

"I like his method much. It is respectful, and puts every one in his place."

"And so it ended —"

"Without a soul having touched me, my friend."

"Except the three boys who were holding you up."

"Oh! doubtless; but I have already explained to you, I think, the difference between being supported and being measured."

"That is true," replied D'Artagnan, who added to himself, "Faith! unless I am much mistaken, this is a godsend which I have put in the way of that rascal of a Molière, and we shall certainly see the scene hit off to the life in some comedy or other."

Porthos was smiling.

"What are you laughing at?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Must I own it to you? Well, I am laughing at my own good luck."

"That is true enough. I do not know a luckier man than you. But what is your latest piece of good fortune?"

"Well, congratulate me, my friend."

"I ask nothing better."

"It appears that I am the very first who has ever been measured after that fashion."

"You are sure of it?"

"Nearly so. Certain signs of intelligence which passed between Volière and the lads convinced me of it."

"Well, my dear fellow, that does not surprise me on Molière's part," said D'Artagnan.

"Volière, my friend."

"Oh! no, no, upon my word! I am quite willing that you should call him Volière, but for me he shall be Molière still. Well, as I was saying, that does not surprise me on the part of Molière, who is an intelligent fellow, whom you have inspired with a new idea."

"And he will make use of it in future, I am sure."

"Make use of it, indeed? I should think so. He will make use, and great use, of it. For, look you, my friend, of all our tailors, Molière is the one who best dresses out our barons, our counts, and our marquises, according to their true measure."

Upon this speech, of which we will discuss neither the appropriateness nor the depth of meaning, D'Artagnan and Porthos went out together from Maître Percerin's, and got into their coach. We will leave them there, if it so please the reader, and follow Molière and Aramis to Saint-Mandé.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE HIVE, THE BEES, AND THE HONEY.

THE Bishop of Vannes, much concerned at having encountered D'Artagnan at M. Percerin's, was returning to Saint-Mandé in a very ill humor. Molière, on the other hand, was highly elated over the clever rough sketch he had just made, and the fact that he knew where to put his hand upon the original, whenever he wished to turn his sketch into a finished picture; he arrived therefore in his most joyous mood. They found the whole first floor of the left wing occupied by these Epicureans, who were of the greatest vogue in Paris, and the most intimate frequenters of the house, each busy in his own department, like bees in their cells, in producing their sweetest honey for the regal cake which M. Fouquet proposed to offer to his Majesty Louis XIV. during the fête at Vaux.

Péllisson, his head buried in his hands, was laying the foundations of the prologue to "*Les Fâcheux*," a comedy in three acts, which was to be represented by Poquelin de Molière, as D'Artagnan called him, or Coquelin de Volière, as he was styled by Porthos.

Loret, in all the artlessness of his profession as a journalist, — journalists having been artless in every age, — Loret was drawing up a narrative of the fêtes at Vaux, before these fêtes had taken place. La Fontaine was straying about amongst the others, like a wandering spirit, troublesome, absent-minded, insupportable, whispering and humming in the ear of each a thousand poetic absurdities. He disturbed Péllisson so often that finally, raising his head in ill humor, the latter said :

"At least, La Fontaine, you might pick up a rhyme for me, since you say that you are walking on the slopes of Parnassus !"

"What rhyme do you want ?" asked the Fabler, as Madame de Sévigné called him.

"I want a rhyme to *lumière*."

"*Ornière*," suggested La Fontaine.

"But, my dear friend, one cannot talk of ruts when celebrating the delights of Vaux," said Loret.

"And, moreover, it does not rhyme," added Péllisson.

"How is that? does not rhyme?" cried La Fontaine, in surprise.

"Yes, my friend, you have a detestable habit — a habit which will prevent your ever becoming a poet of the first order. You rhyme loosely!"

"Oh, oh! Péliisson, you think so, do you?"

"Yes, my friend, I think so. Remember that a rhyme is never good, so long as a better one can be found."

"Very well, then! I shall write no more except in prose," said La Fontaine, who had taken Péliisson's reproach to heart. "Ah, I have long suspected as much; I am only a poor rascal of a poet! That is the pure truth."

"Do not say that, my dear fellow, you are too sweeping; there is some merit in your fables."

"And to begin with," went on La Fontaine, pursuing his idea, "I will burn a hundred lines or so which I have just made."

"And where are these lines?"

"In my head."

"Well! if they are in your head how can you burn them?"

"That is true," agreed La Fontaine. "And yet, if I do not burn them —"

"What will happen, then?"

"They will stay in my mind, and I shall never be able to forget them."

"The devil!" exclaimed Loret. "That is dangerous business! It might drive one mad."

"The devil, the devil! what shall I do?"

"I have found out a remedy," interposed Molière, who had just entered.

"What is it?"

"Write them first and burn them afterwards."

"How simple it sounds! and yet I should never have thought of it. How clever he is, that devil of a Molière?" exclaimed La Fontaine, and then striking his forehead he added, "and you, Jean de la Fontaine, will never be anything but an ass!"

"What are you saying there?" broke in Molière, who had drawn near the poet, and heard his last aside.

"I was saying that I should never be anything but an ass, my dear comrade," replied La Fontaine with a deep sigh, and his eyes swelling with tears. "Yes," he went on with growing sadness. "It seems that I rhyme loosely."

"That is wrong."

"You see, I am a puppy!"

"Who said so?"

"*Parbleu!* it was Péliisson; did you not, Péliisson?"

But Péliisson, again immersed in composition, took good care not to reply.

"But if Péliisson told you you were a puppy," cried Molière, "Péliisson has deeply insulted you."

"Do you think so —"

"Oh, my dear friend, as you are a gentleman I conjure you not to let such an insult go unpunished."

"Phew!" cried La Fontaine.

"Did you ever fight?"

"Once, my friend, with a lieutenant of light-horse."

"What wrong had he done you?"

"It seems he had been making love to my wife."

"Ah! ah!" said Molière, turning pale. But as upon La Fontaine's avowal the others had turned round, Molière kept upon his lips the mocking smile which had nearly died away, and went on bantering La Fontaine. "And what was the result of this duel?"

"The result was that, on the ground, my adversary disarmed me, and then made me an apology, promising never to set foot in my house again."

"And did you hold yourself satisfied?"

"Not at all! On the contrary, I picked up my sword and said to him: 'Monsieur, I did not fight with you because you were my wife's lover, but because I was told I ought to fight. Now, since I have never known any peace until you began coming to the house, do me the pleasure to keep on coming as you have done, or else, *morbleu!* let us set to again.' And so," continued La Fontaine, "he was forced to go on making love to madame, and I have gone on being the happiest husband on earth."

All burst out laughing; Molière alone passed his hand across his eyes. Why? Perhaps to wipe away a tear, perhaps to stifle a sigh. For alas! as we know, Molière was a moralist, but he was no philosopher.

"It is all the same," he resumed, going back to the previous subject of discussion. "Péliisson has insulted you."

"Ah, that is true. I had forgotten it already."

"And I am going to call him out, and on your behalf."

"You may do so, if you think it indispensable."

"I regard it as indispensable and I shall go to him —"

"Wait a moment," said La Fontaine, "I wish to ask your advice."

"Upon what? — this insult?"

"No, tell me truly whether *lumière* does not rhyme with *ornière* — I should make them rhyme."

"*Parbleu!* I knew you would, and I have made a hundred thousand similar rhymes in my day."

"A hundred thousand?" exclaimed La Fontaine. "Four times as many as in '*La Pucelle*,' which M. Chapelain is meditating. Is it upon the same subject that you have made a hundred thousand verses, my friend?"

"But listen to me, eternal dreamer!" cried Molière.

"It is certain," went on La Fontaine, "that *légume*, for instance, rhymes with *posthume*."

"Especially in the plural."

"Yes, in the plural especially, because then it rhymes not by three letters only, but by four, just as *ornière* does with *lumière*. Put *ornières* and *lumières* in the plural, my dear Péliſson," said La Fontaine, clapping his brother-poet on the shoulder, having completely forgotten the insult for which he was to avenge himself, "and it will rhyme."

"What?" asked Péliſson.

"Molière says so, and Molière is a judge; he admits himself having written a hundred thousand lines."

"Come!" cried Molière, laughing, "there he is off again!"

"It is just like *rivage*, which rhymes admirably with *herbage*. I would put my hand in the fire for it."

"But —" said Molière.

"I tell you this," continued La Fontaine, "because you are writing an interlude for Vaux, are you not?"

"Oh, yes, '*Les Fâcheux*.'"

"Ah! '*Les Fâcheux*,' that is it; I remember. Well, it struck me that a prologue might suit your play."

"Without doubt, it would suit admirably."

"Ah! you agree with me, then?"

"I agree with you so perfectly that I have already asked you to write this prologue."

"You asked me to write it — me?"

"Yes, you; and upon your refusal, I begged you to ask Péliſson, who is engaged upon it at this moment."

"Ah, then! that is what Péliſſon is doing? Faith! you may be right at times, my dear Molière."

"And when is that?"

"When you tell me that I am a little absent-minded. It is an ugly fault; I mean to correct myself of it, and I will write your prologue for you."

"But, seeing that Péliſſon is doing it —"

"Ah, true! Triple imbecile that I am! Loret was quite right in calling me a puppy!"

"It was not Loret who said so, my friend."

"Well, whoever did say it, then; it matters little to me! And so your play is called '*Les Fâcheux*?' Now tell me, would you not rhyme *heureux* with *fâcheux*?"

"In case of necessity, yes."

"And even with *capricieux*?"

"Oh! no, no, certainly not!"

"It would be a little daring, would it not? But after all, why is it so daring?"

"Because the terminations are too different."

"I was fancying —" said La Fontaine, leaving Molière for Loret. "I was fancying —"

"What were you fancying?" said Loret, in the midst of a phrase, "speak quickly!"

"It is you who are writing the prologue to '*Les Fâcheux*,' is it not?"

"No, *mordieu*! it is Péliſſon!"

"Ah! it is Péliſſon?" cried La Fontaine, going over to Péliſſon. "I was imagining," he went on, "that the nymph of Vaux —"

"Ah! how pretty!" cried Loret, "the nymph of Vaux! Thanks, La Fontaine, you have given me the last two lines for my rhymed chronicle:

*"Et l'on vit la nymphe de Vaux
Donner le prix à leurs travaux."*

"Ah, good! That is something like a rhyme," said Péliſſon. "If you could only rhyme like that, La Fontaine!"

"But it seems that I do rhyme like that, since Loret says it is I who gave him the two lines he has just read."

"Very well, if you rhyme like that, come, tell me, how would you begin your prologue?"

"I should begin for instance: *O nymphe — qui —* after

qui I should put in some verb in the second person plural of the indicative present, and I should go on thus : — *Cette grotte profonde.*"

"But the verb, the verb?" insisted Pélisson.

"*Pour venir admirer le plus grand roi du monde.*"

continued La Fontaine.

"But the verb, the verb?" obstinately persisted Pélisson. "That second personal plural of the indicative present!"

"Well, then: *quittez.*"

"*O nymphe qui quittez cette grotte profonde
Pour venir admirer le plus grand roi du monde.*"

"You would put *qui quittez*, would you?"

"Why not?"

"*Qui — qui — !*"

"Ah! my dear fellow," exclaimed La Fontaine, "you are a shocking pedant."

"Without counting," said Molière, "that in the second line, dear La Fontaine, *venir admirer* is very weak."

"Then you see what a contemptible fellow I am after all — a puppy as you said."

"But I never said it."

"As Loret said, then."

"It was not Loret either; it was Pélisson."

"Well, Pélisson was right, a hundred times over. But what vexes me above all things, my dear Molière, is that I fear we shall not have our costumes as Epicureans."

"Were you depending on yours for the fête?"

"Yes, for the fête and after the fête. My housekeeper has warned me that my own is a trifle shabby."

"Faith, your housekeeper is right; it is more than a trifle so —"

"Ah, you see," replied La Fontaine, "I left it on the floor in my room, and my cat —"

"Well, your cat —"

"My cat kittened on it, which faded it a little."

Molière burst out laughing, and Loret and Pélisson followed suit. At this moment the Bishop of Vannes appeared, carrying under his arm a roll of plans and parchments. As if the angel of death had frozen all gay and sprightly fancies, as if

this pale face had frightened away the Graces to whom Xenocrates offered sacrifices, thus silence fell at once over the study, and each one resumed his composure and his pen.

Aramis distributed the notes of invitation to the company, and thanked them in behalf of M. Fouquet. The superintendent, he said, being detained in his cabinet by business, could not come to see them, but begged them to send him some specimens of their day's work, to help him to forget the weariness of his night's work.

At these words all bent their brows. Even La Fontaine seated himself at a table and sent his pen flying over a sheet of vellum; Péliisson made a fair copy of his prologue; Molière contributed fifty fresh verses with which his visit to Percerin had inspired him; Loret produced his article upon the marvellous fêtes which he prophesied, and Aramis, laden with spoils like the king of the bees, that great black drone, decked with purple and gold, returned to his apartment, silent and full of business; but before retiring he said:

"Remember, gentlemen, that we all leave to-morrow evening."

"In that case I must give notice at home," said Molière.

"Oh, yes, poor Molière!" said Loret, smiling, "he loves his home."

"*He loves, yes,*" replied Molière, with his gentle, melancholy smile, "*he loves*, which does not mean he is loved."

"As for me," said La Fontaine, "I am not loved at Château-Thierry, of that I am sure."

At this moment Aramis reappeared, after a brief absence. "Will not some one come with me?" he asked. "I am going through Paris, after passing a quarter of an hour with M. Fouquet. I offer a seat in my coach."

"Good! I accept," said Molière, "I am in haste."

"I shall dine here," said Loret; "M. de Gourville has promised me some crawfish:—

"Il ne à promis des écrevisses."

"Find a rhyme for that, La Fontaine."

Aramis went out laughing as he knew how to laugh; Molière followed him. As they reached the foot of the staircase La Fontaine opened the door a crack and called after them:

*"Moyennant que tu l'écrevisses
Il t'a promis des écrevisses."*

The peals of laughter with which the Epicureans greeted this sally reached the ears of Fouquet as Aramis opened the door of his cabinet. As for Molière, he had gone out to order the horses while Aramis was exchanging a few final words with the superintendent.

"Oh, how they laugh up there!" said Fouquet, with a sigh.

"And you do not laugh, monseigneur?"

"I laugh no more now, M. d'Herblay."

"And yet the fête is approaching."

"Yes, and money melting away."

"Have I not assured you that this was my affair?"

"Yes, you promised me millions."

"You shall have them on the day following the King's entrance at Vaux."

Fouquet looked searchingly at Aramis, and passed his icy hand across his damp brow. Aramis perceived that the superintendent either mistrusted him or doubted his power to procure the money.

How could Fouquet suppose it possible that a poor bishop, ex-abbé, ex-musketeer, could command such a sum?

"Why do you doubt me?" asked Aramis.

Fouquet smiled and shook his head.

"A man of little faith!" added the bishop.

"My dear M. d'Herblay," replied Fouquet, "if I fall —"

"Well, if you fall —"

"I shall at least fall from such a height that I shall be crushed in the fall." Then tossing his head as if to escape from himself: "Whence come you, dear friend?" he said.

"From Paris — from Percerin's."

"And for what purpose did you go yourself to Percerin's? I do not imagine that you attach such great importance to the costumes of our poets."

"No, I went there to order a surprise."

"A surprise?"

"Yes, for you to offer to the King."

"Will it be a costly one?"

"Oh, it will cost merely a hundred pistoles, which you will give Le Brun."

"A painting? ah, so much the better! And what is this painting to represent?"

"I will tell you that later. Then at the same time, whatever you may say, I went to see the costumes of our poets."

"Bah! and will they be sumptuous and elegant?"

"Superb! There will not be many great nobles who can rival them. The world will see what a difference there is between the courtiers of wealth and those of friendship."

"Ever witty and gracious, dear prelate!"

"Taught in your school."

Fouquet grasped his hand. "And where are you going now?" he said.

"I am about to start for Paris, as soon as you have given me a letter."

"A letter to whom?"

"To M. de Lyonne."

"And what do you want with Lyonne?"

"I wish him to sign a *lettre de cachet*."

"A *lettre de cachet*? You wish to send some one to the Bastille?"

"No, quite the contrary. I wish to let some one out."

"Ah, and who is that?"

"A poor devil — a youth, a child in fact, who was thrown into the Bastille ten years ago for a couple of Latin verses he wrote against the Jesuits."

"A couple of Latin verses! and for writing Latin verses the wretched boy has been in prison for ten years?"

"Yes."

"And he has committed no other crime?"

"Aside from those two verses, he is as innocent as you or I."

"Upon your word?"

"Upon my honor."

"What is his name?"

"Seldon."

"Ah, this is too much! and you knew this horror and never told me?"

"It was only yesterday that his mother appealed to me, monseigneur."

"And is this woman poor?"

"In the deepest misery."

"Oh, God!" cried Fouquet. "Thou dost at times permit such injustice to be done on earth, that we can understand how unhappy men may doubt Thy existence! Here, M. d'Herblay!" and taking up his pen Fouquet wrote a few hurried lines to his colleague, Lyonne.

Aramis took the letter and was about to go. "Stay!" said Fouquet, and opening his drawer he took out from it ten treasury notes, each for a thousand livres.

"Here," he said, "set the son at liberty and give the mother these; but, above all, do not let her know —"

"What, monseigneur?"

"That she is ten thousand livres richer than I. She would say I am but a wretched superintendent! Go, and I hope that God will bless those who are mindful of His poor."

"So I hope, also," replied Aramis, as he bent and kissed Fouquet's hand. And he went out rapidly, carrying with him the letter to Lyonne and the treasury notes for Seldon's mother, and picking up Molière, who was beginning to wax impatient.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ANOTHER SUPPER IN THE BASTILLE.

SEVEN o'clock was striking from the great clock of the Bastille, that famous clock which, like all the accessories of the prison of state, whose office was to torture, recalled to the prisoners the passing of each hour of their long agony. The dial-plate of the Bastille — which, like most clocks of the period, was adorned with figures — represented Saint Peter in bonds.

It was the supper hour of the poor captives. The doors, grating on their enormous hinges, made way for the passage of platters and baskets of provisions, the quality of which, as we know from M. de Baisemeaux himself, was proportioned to the station of the prisoner.

We have heard the theories enunciated on this subject by M. de Baisemeaux, the sovereign dispenser of gastronomic delicacies, the head cook of the royal fortress, whose well-filled baskets were ascending the narrow stairs, carrying some consolation to the prisoners in the bottom of honestly-filled bottles.

It was the supper hour of the governor also, and as he was entertaining a guest this evening, the spit was loaded more heavily than usual. Roast partridges, flanked by quails and larded leverets, boiled fowls, hams fried and sprinkled with white wine, Guipuzcoa artichokes, and crawfish broth, — these

with soups and *hors-d'œuvres* constituted the governor's bill of fare.

Baisemeaux, seated at table, was rubbing his hands as he looked at the Bishop of Vannes, who, booted like a cavalier, dressed in gray, and with a sword at his side, kept talking of his excessive hunger, and showing the liveliest impatience.

M. de Baisemeaux de Montlezun was not accustomed to familiarity on the part of his Grace my Lord of Vannes; and this evening Aramis was in a sprightly mood, and poured forth confidence upon confidence. The prelate had put on a touch of the musketeer; the bishop unbent to the verge of jollity. As for M. Baisemeaux, with the facility of vulgar natures, he gave himself free rein in response to this partial unbending on the part of his guest.

"Monsieur," he said, "for in truth this evening I dare not call you monseigneur."

"By no means," said Aramis, "call me monsieur. I am booted."

"Well, then, monsieur, do you know of whom you remind me to-night?"

"Faith, no," said Aramis, filling his glass, "but I hope I remind you of a good boon companion."

"You remind me of two such. Monsieur François, shut the window. The wind may incommode his Grace."

"And let him go," added Aramis. "The supper is served; we can eat it without lackeys. I like very well when I am in good company, when I am with a friend —"

Baisemeaux bowed respectfully.

"I like very well," pursued Aramis, "to wait on myself."

"You may go, François," cried Baisemeaux. "I was saying, then, that your Grace reminds me of two persons; one of them very illustrious, the late cardinal, the great cardinal, he of Rochelle, for he was booted like you, was he not?"

"Yes, faith," said Aramis; "and the other?"

"The other was a certain musketeer, a pretty fellow, very brave, very dashing, very lucky, who from abbé turned musketeer, and from musketeer turned abbé."

Aramis digned to smile.

"From abbé," went on Baisemeaux, encouraged by the smile; "from abbé, bishop, and from bishop —"

"Ah! let us stop there, I beg of you," exclaimed Aramis.

"I say, monsieur, that you give me the idea of a cardinal."

"Enough, my dear M. de Baisemeaux. As you were saying, I am booted like a cavalier, but for all that I do not wish even to-night to quarrel with the church —"

"And yet you have some wicked design in your head, monseigneur."

"Oh, I confess it! wicked as everything worldly is."

"You run about the town, and visit the ladies' *ruelles* masked?"

"Yes, as you say, masked."

"And you indulge in sword-play still?"

"I believe I do at times, but only when I am driven to it. Do me the pleasure, will you, to call François?"

"The wine is beside you."

"It is not for wine, but because it is hot here, and the window is shut."

"I close the windows at supper time in order not to hear the sentinels' rounds, and the arrival of messengers."

"Ah! yes. You hear them, then, when the window is open?"

"Only too plainly; and it is disturbing, you understand!"

"But now we are suffocating. François!"

François entered.

"Open the window, I beg of you, Master François; you permit me, dear M. de Baisemeaux?"

"Monseigneur is at home here," replied the governor.

The window was opened.

"Do you realize," said M. de Baisemeaux, "that you are going to be very lonely now, since the Comte de la Fère has rejoined his penates at Blois. He is a very old friend, is he not?"

"You know it as well as I, Baisemeaux, since you were with us in the musketeers."

"Bah! with my friends I count neither bottles nor years."

"And you are right. But I do more than love M. le Comte de la Fère, my dear Baisemeaux; I revere him!"

"Well, it is singular," said the governor, "but do you know, I prefer M. d'Artagnan. There is a man who drinks long and deep! Such people, at least, let you see what they are thinking about."

"Baisemeaux, make me drunk to-night. Let us hold revel as we used to do, and if I have a trouble in the depths of my heart, I promise you that you shall see it as plainly as you could see a diamond in the bottom of your glass."

"Bravo!" cried Baisemeaux, and he poured out a great draught of wine and tossed it off with trembling delight at the thought of sharing in the deadly sins of an archbishop. While he was drinking, he did not notice with what attention Aramis was listening to the noises in the court-yard. A messenger rode in about eight o'clock, just as the fifth bottle was being brought in by François, but though this messenger made a great noise, Baisemeaux heard nothing.

"The devil take him!" said Aramis.

"Who? What?" demanded Baisemeaux. "I hope you do not mean the wine you are drinking, nor him you are drinking it with."

"No, it is a horseman who is making noise enough in the court for a whole squadron."

"Good! some messenger," replied the governor, redoubling his bumpers. "Yes, the devil take him! and so fast that we shall have no more of him. Hurrah! hurrah!"

"You are forgetting me, Baisemeaux! Look, my glass is empty," and Aramis held up his shining goblet.

"On my honor, you delight me — François, more wine!" François entered.

"Wine, fellow, and the best!"

"Yes, monsieur, but — a messenger has arrived."

"To the devil with him, I said."

"Monsieur, nevertheless —"

"Let him go to the office; we will see him to-morrow. To-morrow will be time enough; to-morrow will be daylight," said Baisemeaux, singing the last words.

"Ah! monsieur," grumbled the soldier François, in spite of himself, "monsieur —"

"Take care!" said Aramis, "take care!"

"Of what, dear M. d'Herblay?" said Baisemeaux, already half drunk.

"The letters brought by couriers to the governor of a fortress are sometimes orders —"

"Almost always."

"And do not these orders come from the ministers?"

"Yes, undoubtedly, but —"

"And do these ministers do anything beyond countersigning the King's signature?"

"Perhaps you are right. Nevertheless it is very tiresome when you are seated at a good table, tête-à-tête with a friend.

Oh, pardon me, monsieur, I was forgetting that it is I who am entertaining you at supper, and that I am speaking to a future cardinal."

"Let us leave all that, dear Baisemeaux, and return to our soldier, to François."

"Well, what has François done?"

"He has murmured."

"He has done very wrong, then."

"However, he has murmured, you understand, which shows that something extraordinary is going on. It may be that it was not François who did wrong to murmur, but you who did wrong not to listen to him."

"Wrong! I in the wrong before François! That sounds rather hard."

"I mean that it is an irregularity. Pardon me, but I thought I ought to call your attention to what may be important."

"Oh! perhaps you are right!" stammered Baisemeaux. "An order from the King is sacred, of course. But these orders that come while one is at supper — I repeat, may the devil —"

"If you had acted thus with the great cardinal, eh? my dear Baisemeaux, and the order had turned out an important one —"

"I am acting thus in order not to disturb a bishop; am I not excusable, *monbleu*?"

"Do not forget, Baisemeaux, that I have worn a uniform, and that I am used to seeing obedience everywhere."

"You wish, then —"

"I wish you to do your duty, my friend, or rather I beg you to do so, before this soldier."

"That is categorical!" observed Baisemeaux. François still waited.

"Let them send up this order of the King's," said Baisemeaux, drawing himself up; then in a lower voice: "Do you know what it will be? I will tell you; something about as interesting as this: 'Be careful of fire in the neighborhood of the powder magazine;' or else, 'Watch over such a one, he is clever at escaping.' Oh, if you knew, monseigneur, how many times I have been waked with a start from the sweetest, deepest slumber by orderlies riding up on the gallop to say to me, or rather to bring me a written order with these words: 'M. de Baisemeaux, what news?' It is evident enough that

those who waste their time writing such orders have never slept in the Bastille. They would be better acquainted with the thickness of my walls, the vigilance of my officers, the frequency of my rounds. In short, what could you expect, monseigneur? It is their business to write and torment me when I am at peace, to disturb me when I am happy," added Baisemeaux, bowing to Aramis. "Let us leave them to their business, then."

"And do you do yours," added the bishop, smiling, and yet with a piercing glance which was a command though accompanied by a caress.

François reëntered and Baisemeaux took from his hands the order of the ministry; he unsealed it deliberately and read it in the same way. Aramis feigned to drink, in order to watch his host through the glass. Having finished reading, Baisemeaux said:

"What did I tell you just now?"

"What was it?"

"An order of release. I ask you now if that is not a pretty matter to disturb us for!"

"It is a very pretty matter for him whom it concerns; you will at least acknowledge that, my dear governor."

"And at eight o'clock at night!"

"But it is an act of charity."

"Charity, I grant you. But towards that fellow there who is being bored, not for me who am amusing myself!" said Baisemeaux, exasperated.

"Is it a great loss for you — one of those prisoners high on the pay-roll?"

"Ah, yes, indeed! a miserable fellow, a poor sot at five francs."

"Will you let me see it," asked M. d'Herblay, "if it would not be indiscreet?"

"Oh! not at all. Read for yourself."

"There is 'urgent' on the sheet; you noticed that, did you not?"

"Oh, admirable! 'Urgent' — a fellow who has been here for ten years! They are in great haste to let him out to-day, this very evening at eight o'clock!" and Baisemeaux, shrugging his shoulders with an air of high disdain, threw the order on the table and began eating again.

"They have these sudden impulses," he went on, with his

mouth full; "they seize a man one fine day, they feed him up for ten years or so and write to you: 'Watch this rascal well!' or 'Keep him strictly!' and then, all at once, when you have got to looking upon the prisoner as a very dangerous man, suddenly, without cause or precedent, they write: 'Set him at liberty,' and add to their missive 'urgent!' You will admit, monseigneur, that it is enough to make a man shrug his shoulders."

"Well, what is to be done? One protests like that and then one executes the order," said Aramis.

"Good! good! one executes it! — oh, patience! — you must not imagine that I am such a slave as that."

"Good Heavens! my dear M. Baisemeaux, who ever said such a thing? Your independence is well known."

"Thank Heaven!"

"But your good heart is known as well."

"Ah! I should think so!"

"And your obedience to superiors. Once a soldier, you see, Baisemeaux, always a soldier."

"And I shall obey strictly, too; and to-morrow morning at daybreak the prisoner shall be set free."

"To-morrow?"

"At daybreak."

"Why not to-night, since the *lettre de cachet* bears, both on the superscription and inside, 'urgent'?"

"Because to-night we are at supper, and that is urgent too."

"Dear Baisemeaux, booted though I am, I still feel myself a priest, and charity is to me a more imperious duty than eating and drinking, even. This unhappy prisoner has suffered long enough, since you have just told me that he has been your prisoner these ten years. Abridge his suffering, then! One happy moment is awaiting him; give it to him as speedily as possible. God will repay you in paradise with years of felicity."

"You wish it?"

"I implore you."

"Like this, in the middle of our repast?"

"I entreat you; this good action will be worth ten *benedictines*."

"Let it be as you desire, then, — only your supper will be cold."

"Oh! do not heed that."

Baisemeaux leaned back to ring for François, and in doing so he very naturally turned towards the door. The order was still upon the table. Aramis took advantage of the instant when Baisemeaux was not looking to change the paper for another, folded in the same manner, which he drew from his pocket.

"François," said the governor, "send the major up here with the turnkey of the Bertaudière." François bowed, and went out, leaving the host and his guest once more alone.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE GENERAL OF THE ORDER.

A BRIEF silence followed, during which Aramis never took his eyes off the governor. The latter seemed only half decided on disturbing himself in the midst of his supper, and was evidently trying to find some reason, good or bad, for delaying at least until after dessert. All at once he appeared to have hit upon a pretext.

"Eh!" he cried, "it is quite impossible."

"How impossible?" said Aramis. "Let us hear, dear friend, where the impossibility lies."

"It is out of the question, setting a prisoner at liberty at this hour of the night. Where can he go — a perfect stranger in Paris?"

"Let him go where he chooses."

"Ah! you see how it is. One might as well set a blind man at liberty."

"I have my coach here. I will set him down wherever he wishes to be taken."

"You have an answer for everything. François, let the major be ordered to open the cell of M. Seldon, No. 3 Bertaudière."

"Seldon!" exclaimed Aramis, quite simply. "I think you said Seldon?"

"I said Seldon, certainly. It is the name of the man to be released."

"Oh! you mean Marchiali," said Aramis.

"Marchiali, indeed! No, no. Seldon."

"I think you are making a mistake, M. Baisemeaux."

"I read the order."

"So did I!"

"And I read 'Seldon' in letters as large as that." Here Baisemeaux held up one finger.

"And I read 'Marchiali' in letters as large as this." And Aramis held up two fingers.

"Let us settle the matter, then," said Baisemeaux, sure of his point. "The paper is here; we have only to read it."

"I can read 'Marchiali,'" repeated Aramis, unfolding the paper. "Look!"

Baisemeaux looked, and his arms dropped to his sides.

"Yes, yes!" he cried, astonished. "It is certainly written there 'Marchiali.' It is quite true!"

"Ah!"

"What? The man we talk about so much! The man whom they are constantly recommending me to look after!"

"It says 'Marchiali,'" repeated the inflexible Aramis.

"I must admit it, monseigneur, but I cannot understand it in the least."

"You can believe your eyes, however."

"Faith! To think of its being Marchiali, after all!"

"And in a legible handwriting, too."

"'T is a wonder! I can still see that order, with the name, 'Seldon, Irishman.' I see it! yes, and I even recollect seeing a blot of ink underneath the name."

"No, there is no ink there; there is no blot."

"Oh, but there was, though! The more by token, that I rubbed off the powder that was on the blot."

"In a word, M. de Baisemeaux, however that may have been, and whatever you may have seen," said Aramis; "here is the order signed to release Marchiali, with or without blot."

"The order is signed to deliver Marchiali," repeated Baisemeaux, mechanically, like a man striving to recover his wits.

"And you are going to release him at once? If your heart prompts you to set Seldon free at the same time, I assure you that I shall not oppose it the least in the world."

Aramis punctuated this remark with a smile, the irony of which sobered Baisemeaux completely, and restored his courage.

"Monseigneur," he said, "this Marchiali is that very same

prisoner whom a priest, a confessor of our order, came to visit in such a secret and imperious manner the other day."

"I know nothing of that, monsieur," replied the bishop.

"Yet it was not so very long ago, dear M. d'Herblay."

"That is true. But with us, monsieur, it is best that the man of to-day should know nothing of what was done by the man of yesterday."

"In any case," said Baisemeaux, "the Jesuit confessor's visit seems to have brought this man good fortune."

Aramis made no reply, but went on eating and drinking.

Baisemeaux, on his part, no longer touching the food upon the table, took up the order once more, and examined it closely in every way. This scrutiny, under ordinary circumstances, would have made the impatient Aramis flush to his ears, but now the Bishop of Vannes did not become so easily irritated, especially as he reflected how dangerous such irritation would be.

"Are you going to liberate Marchiali?" he asked. "Oh, what a mellow, fragrant sherry this is, my dear governor!"

"Monseigneur," replied Baisemeaux, "I shall liberate Marchiali when I have recalled the messenger who brought the order, and above all, if, on examining him, I become convinced —"

"All orders are sealed and the contents are unknown to the messenger. How, then, can you convince yourself, I beg to know?"

"So be it, monseigneur; but I shall send to the ministry, and there M. de Lyonne can either recall the order or confirm it."

"What is the good of all this?" asked Aramis, coldly.

"What is the good?"

"Yes. I ask you of what use it is?"

"It is always of use not to be mistaken, monseigneur, not to be wanting in the respect which every subaltern owes to his superiors, never to infringe the obligations of the service one has undertaken."

"Very good! you have spoken so eloquently that I am lost in admiration. It is quite true that a subaltern owes respect to his superiors, that he is guilty when he makes a mistake, and that he will be punished when he infringes the rules of his service."

Baisemeaux stared at the bishop in amazement.

"It therefore follows that you are about to ask advice, in order to set your conscience at ease."

"Yes, monseigneur."

"And that if a superior gives you orders you will obey."

"You cannot doubt it, monseigneur."

"You are familiar with the King's signature, M. de Baisemeaux?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Is it not upon this order?"

"That is true, but it may be —"

"It may be forged, you mean."

"Such things have happened, monseigneur."

"You are right; and what of M. de Lyonne's signature?"

"I see that, too, upon the order; but just as the King's signature may be forged, by the same token M. de Lyonne's may be."

"You make giant strides in logic, M. de Baisemeaux," said Aramis, "and your argument is irresistible. But upon what do you found your belief that these signatures are false?"

"Upon the absence of the signers. There is nothing to check his Majesty's signature, and M. de Lyonne is not here to tell me that he signed."

"Very well, M. de Baisemeaux," said Aramis, bending his eagle glance upon the governor, "I so frankly adopt your doubts and your fashion of clearing them up, that I shall take a pen, if you will hand me one."

Baisemeaux handed him a pen.

"And a sheet of white paper," added Aramis.

Baisemeaux gave him the paper.

"And I shall write you an order, — I who am here, incontestably present, am I not? — an order to which I am sure you will give credence, however incredulous you may be."

Baisemeaux turned pale before this icy assurance. It seemed to him that Aramis' voice, but now so gay and jovial, had turned sinister and funereal, that the wax candles were changed into sepulchral torches, and the wine glasses into chalices of blood.

Aramis took up the pen and began to write, while Baisemeaux in terror read over his shoulder.

"A. M. D. G." wrote the bishop, and drew a cross under these four letters, which signify *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, and proceeded:

"It is our pleasure that the order brought to M. de Baisemeaux de Montlezun, governor, in the King's name, of the fortress of the Bastille, shall be held by him good and valid, and be immediately put into execution.

"(Signed) D'HERBLAY,

"General of the Order, by the grace of God."

Baisemeaux was so struck with amazement that his features became contracted ; his lips were parted, and his eyes fixed. He did not stir, nor articulate a sound. Nothing could be heard in that great chamber but the buzzing of a little fly, fluttering around the candles.

Aramis, without deigning even to glance at the man whom he had reduced to such a miserable state, drew from his pocket a small case of black wax ; he sealed his letter, affixed to it a seal hanging at his breast beneath his doublet, and when this operation was complete he presented the missive, in perfect silence, to M. de Baisemeaux.

The latter, whose hands were trembling pitiably, turned a dull and vacant glance upon the seal ; one last gleam of emotion passed over his features, and he fell back in his chair like one thunderstruck.

"Come, come," said Aramis, after a long silence, during which the governor of the Bastille had regained his senses by degrees ; "do not make me think, dear Baisemeaux, that the presence of the general of the order is as terrible as that of the Almighty, and that men die from merely looking on him. Take courage ! rise and give me your hand, and obey."

Baisemeaux, somewhat reassured, arose and kissed Aramis' hand.

"At once ?" he muttered.

"Oh ! not in such haste, my dear host ; be seated again and let us do honor to this excellent dessert."

"Monseigneur, I shall never rally from such a blow as this. I who have laughed and joked with you ! I who have treated you on a footing of equality !"

"Hush, old comrade, no more of that," replied the bishop, who felt how tightly the cord was strained, and how dangerous it would be to snap it ; "let us each live our own life. To you my protection and friendship, to me your obedience. These two tributes faithfully paid, we can still be merry."

Baisemeaux reflected. He perceived at a glance the conse-

quences of this removal of a prisoner upon a forged order, and weighing against them the guarantee offered him by the official order of the general, he felt it to be of no weight in the scales.

Aramis divined his thoughts. "My dear Baisemeaux," he said, "you are a simpleton! Drop this habit of reflecting, therefore, when I take the trouble to think for you," and upon another gesture of his Baisemeaux again bowed his head.

"How shall I set about it?" he asked.

"How do you usually set about releasing a prisoner?"

"I have the regulations."

"Follow the regulations, then, my friend."

"I go with my major to the prisoner's chamber, and conduct him myself, when he is a person of importance."

"But this Marchiali is not an important personage, is he?" asked Aramis, carelessly.

"I do not know," replied the governor, as if he had said: "It is for you to inform me."

"Then if you do not know, it seems that I must be right. Proceed, then, with this Marchiali as you would with one of your lesser prisoners."

"Good; so the regulations provide: 'The turnkey or one of the lower officials shall bring the prisoner before the governor in his office.'"

"Well, that is very wise; what further?"

"Next: 'There shall be delivered to the prisoner all objects of value which he bore upon his person at the time of his incarceration, his clothes and papers, unless an order from the minister has otherwise directed.'"

"What says the minister's order in regard to this Marchiali?"

"Nothing; for the unhappy man arrived here without jewels, without papers, and almost without clothes."

"See how simple a matter it is, then! In truth, Baisemeaux, you make mountains out of mole-hills. Remain quietly here, and have the prisoner brought before the authorities."

Baisemeaux obeyed; he called his lieutenant and gave him an order, which the latter transmitted, quite unmoved, to those whom it concerned. Half an hour later a door was heard to close in the court-yard; it was the door of the dungeon which was giving up its prey to the free air of heaven. Aramis blew out all the candles which lighted the room, save one behind the door. This flickering light prevented the sight from fixing

itself steadily upon any object. It multiplied the changing forms and shadows around by its wavering mobility.

Footsteps approached. "Go to meet your men," said Aramis to Baisemeaux.

The governor obeyed. The sergeant and turnkeys withdrew and Baisemeaux reëntered followed by a prisoner.

Aramis had placed himself in a shadow, where he could see without being seen. Baisemeaux, in an agitated voice, read to the young man the order setting him at liberty. The prisoner listened without making a sign or uttering a word.

"Do you swear, in accordance with the regulations," added the governor, "never to reveal anything that you have seen or heard in the Bastille?"

The prisoner perceived a crucifix; he stretched out his hand and took the oath with his lips.

"Now, monsieur, you are free. Where do you intend to go?"

The prisoner turned his head as if seeking behind him for a protector upon whom he had a right to count.

Then it was that Aramis came out from the shadow: "I am here," he said, "to render you, monsieur, any service you may be pleased to ask of me."

The prisoner colored slightly and without hesitation went up to Aramis and passed his arm through the prelate's.

"God have you in his holy keeping!" he said, in a voice whose firmness startled the governor as much as the formula amazed him.

Aramis, pressing the governor's hand, said to him: "Does my order trouble you? Do you fear its being found here in case they should come to make a search?"

"I wish to keep it, monseigneur," replied Baisemeaux. "If they should find it here it will be a sure sign that I am lost, and in that case you will be my last and most powerful auxiliary."

"Being your accomplice, you would say," rejoined Aramis, shrugging his shoulders. "Adieu, Baisemeaux."

The horses were waiting, making the coach shake in their impatience to be off. Baisemeaux conducted the bishop to the foot of the steps. Aramis made his companion enter the coach first, then got in after him, and without giving the coachman any further order, "Go!" he said.

The coach rolled noisily over the pavement of the court-

yard; an officer carrying a torch walked in front of the horses and gave, at each guard-house, the order to let them pass. During the time consumed in opening the successive gates, Aramis hardly breathed and you could have heard his heart beating against his ribs. The prisoner, meanwhile, buried in a corner of the coach, gave no sign of life.

At last a jolt, more violent than the rest, announced that the last moat was crossed. Behind the coach closed the last gate, that of the Rue Saint-Antoine. No more walls to the right or the left. Everywhere the open sky, life and liberty. The horses, held in check by a vigorous hand, went at a gentle pace as far as the middle of the Faubourg; there they broke into a trot.

Little by little, whether they were warming up to their work, or whether they were urged on, they increased in speed, and by the time they reached Bercy, the coach seemed to fly, such was the ardor of the steeds. Thus they reached Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, where relays were in waiting. Thence four horses instead of two bore the carriage in the direction of Melun, and halted for a moment in the midst of the forest of Sénart. The order doubtless had been given beforehand to the postilion, for Aramis was not even obliged to make a sign.

"What is the matter?" asked the prisoner, as if awakening from a deep dream.

"The matter is, monseigneur," said Aramis, "that before going further, your royal Highness and I must have a little talk together."

"I will wait for an opportunity, monsieur," replied the young prince.

"The opportunity could not be better, monseigneur; here we are in the midst of a forest, where no one can hear us."

"What of the postilion?"

"The postilion of this relay is deaf and dumb, monseigneur."

"I am at your service, M. d'Herblay."

"Is it your pleasure to remain in the coach?"

"Yes, we are seated, and I love this coach; it has brought me back to liberty."

"Wait, monseigneur,— there is one more precaution to take."

"What is that?"

"We are on the highroad here; there may be horsemen or

carriages passing by, and seeing us stopping, they might think we were in difficulties, and make offers of assistance, which would be embarrassing."

"Order the postilion, then, to draw up the coach in some side path."

"That is precisely what I was proposing to do, monseigneur."

Aramis made a sign to the deaf-mute by touching him lightly, and he thereupon dismounted, and taking the leaders by the bridle, led them over the soft heath and mossy turf of a winding alley, in the depths of which, on this moonless night, the shadows hid them beneath a curtain blacker than ink.

That done, the man lay down upon a sloping bank beside his horses, which nibbled right and left at the young oak shoots.

"I am listening," said the young prince to Aramis, "but what are you doing there?"

"I am disarming myself of my pistols, which we no longer need, monseigneur."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE TEMPTER.

"PRINCE," said Aramis, turning round in the coach to face his companion, "weak creature though I am, small though my abilities be, and of a low order among thinking beings, it has yet never befallen me to converse with any man without penetrating the living mask which we throw over our thoughts in order to conceal them. But to-night, in the darkness that hides us, in the reserve which I note in you, I can read nothing on your features, and something tells me that I shall find it hard to wrest from you a sincere utterance. I implore you, therefore, not for love of me, for subjects should weigh as nothing in the scales which princes hold, but for love of yourself to attend closely to every word I utter, to every tone of my voice, which in the grave situation where we are placed have each a meaning and value as important as ever have been pronounced in this world."

"I am listening," repeated the young prince, firmly, "without eagerly longing for or fearing anything you are about to say to me."

And he buried himself still more deeply amid the cushions of the carriage, as if seeking to hide from this companion, not only the sight, but the very idea of his presence.

The darkness was intense, and fell like a vast opaque curtain from the summits of the interlacing boughs.

The coach with its wide roof would not have admitted the smallest gleam of light, even if some luminous ray had stolen through the impenetrable blackness which filled this forest path.

"Monseigneur," resumed Aramis, "you know the history of the government which is now ruling France. The King is emerging from a childhood which was captive like yours, obscure as yours, narrow as yours; only instead of enduring, as you did, the bondage of a prison, the obscurity of solitude and concealment, he was forced to suffer all his miseries, all his restrictions, all his humiliations, in the full glare of day, under the pitiless sun that beats upon a throne, — that spot so bathed in light that every stain appears a sordid blot, and even glory a stain. The King has suffered, he resents it, and he will be avenged. He will be a bad king. I do not say that he will spill the blood of his subjects, like Louis XI. or Charles IX., for he has no mortal injuries to avenge; but he will devour his subjects' wealth and substance, because he has suffered in his own substance and possessions. In the first place, therefore, I acquit my conscience as I thus arraign the defects and merits of this prince, and if I condemn him, my conscience absolves me."

Here Aramis paused. It was not to hearken whether the silence of the forest were still the same — it was to gather together his thoughts in the depths of his mind and to give the thought he had spoken time to fix itself in the mind of his companion.

"God does well all that he does," pursued the bishop, "and I am so deeply persuaded of this that I have long rejoiced at having been chosen by him as the depository of the secret which I have helped you to discover. A just and all-seeing Providence required an instrument, at once penetrating, persevering, and full of conviction to accomplish a great work. I am that instrument; I have acuteness, I have penetration, I have deep conviction; I govern a mysterious people, which has taken as its device God's device: *Patiens quia æternus!*"

The prince started.

“I divine, monseigneur, that you are raising your head in amazement on hearing of this people which I command. You did not know that you were treating with a king. Oh! monseigneur, king of a very humble, of a disinherited people — humble since they have no power save while creeping; disinherited, since never — almost never in this world — do my people reap the harvests they have sown, or eat of the fruits they cultivate. My people work for an abstraction, they heap together all the atoms of their power to form one man, and with the sweat of their brow they wreath a misty halo for this man to wear, which his genius must transform into an aureole, gilded with the rays of all the crowns in Christendom. This man you have beside you, monseigneur. He has drawn you from the abyss for a great purpose, and to carry out this sublime purpose, he wishes to raise you above all the powers of earth, above himself.”

The prince touched Aramis’ arm lightly. “You are speaking to me,” he said, “of some great religious order of which you are the head. I gather from your words that on the day when you wish to throw down him whom you have raised, the thing will be done and you will hold your creature of yesterday in the hollow of your hand.”

“Undeceive yourself, monseigneur,” replied the bishop; “I should not run the risk of playing this terrible game with your royal Highness if I had not a double interest in winning it. The day you are elevated you will be elevated forever; you will overturn the footstool as you rise and hurl it so far from your sight that you need never recall its claims to your gratitude.”

“Oh, monsieur!”

“Your impulse, monseigneur, arises from a noble nature. I thank you; believe me that I aspire to something more than gratitude; I am assured that on reaching the summit you will deem me more worthy than ever of being your friend; and then, between us two, we will do such great deeds that our names shall be remembered in ages to come.”

“Tell me plainly, monsieur, — tell me without disguise, — what I am to-day and what you intend that I shall be to-morrow.”

“You are the son of King Louis XIII.; you are the brother of King Louis XIV.; you are the natural and legitimate heir to the crown of France. By keeping you beside him, as he

kept Monsieur, your younger brother, the King would have reserved to himself his rights as legitimate sovereign. God alone and the doctors could have disputed his legitimacy. But the doctors always prefer the king who is to the king who is not. God has willed that you should be persecuted, and it is this persecution which to-day consecrates you King of France. Your right to reign is proved by the very fact of their contesting it; your right to be declared king is proved by their concealing you; it is manifest that you are of the blood-royal since they did not dare to shed your blood as they did that of your servants. See now what God has done for you — he whom you have so often accused of having done all against you. He has bestowed on you the same features, height, age, and voice as your brother, and the very causes that led to your persecution will now lead to your triumphal resurrection. To-morrow, after to-morrow, at any moment, you may seat yourself — a royal phantom, the living shadow of Louis XIV. — upon his throne, whence the will of God, confided for execution to the arm of man, will have precipitated him without hope of return."

"I understand," said the prince, "my brother's blood will not be shed."

"You will be sole arbiter of his destiny."

"This secret which he used against me —"

"You will turn against him. How did he seek to hide it? By hiding you. The living image of himself, you would have betrayed the plot of Mazarin and Anne of Austria. You, prince, will have the same interest in hiding him; for he, a prisoner, will resemble you, as you, a king, will resemble him."

"I go back to what I said before: Who will guard him?"

"Who guarded you?"

"You know this secret; you have made use of it in my behalf. Who else knows it?"

"The queen mother and Madame de Chevreuse."

"What will they do?"

"Nothing, unless you wish it."

"How can that be?"

"How will they recognize you, if you act in such a manner that you cannot be recognized?"

"That is true, but there are serious difficulties in the way."

"What are they, prince?"

"My brother is married; I cannot take my brother's wife."

"I will bring it about that Spain shall consent to the queen's repudiation. It will be in the interest of your new policy as well as of human morality. All that is really noble and really useful in this world will be benefited thereby."

"But my brother in his confinement will speak."

"To whom will he speak? Can the walls hear him?"

"You mean by walls the men in whom you put confidence?"

"If need be, yes, your royal Highness, and moreover — the designs of Providence do not stop half-way. Every far-reaching plan like this is as sure in its results as a mathematical problem. The King in prison will not be as embarrassing to you as you were to him upon his throne. Heaven has given him a soul haughty and impatient by nature; and has moreover enfeebled and disarmed him by habits of luxury and the exercise of supreme power. God who wills that the solution of the problem of which I spoke should be your accession to the throne and the destruction of those who have injured you, has decreed that the vanquished one shall soon end his sufferings and yours. He has thus prepared him, body and soul, for a brief agony. Thrown into prison as you were, obscure, a prey to doubts, leaving nothing behind you, and with the habits of a rigorous life, you could endure it; but your brother a captive, in bonds, forgotten of all, will not long survive the affront. God will recall this soul in his own time — and that will be soon."

At this point in Aramis' gloomy analysis, a night hawk, in the depths of the forest, uttered that prolonged and plaintive cry which startles all living creatures.

"I shall exile the fallen King," said Philippe, with a shudder; "it will be less inhuman."

"The King's good pleasure will decide it," replied Aramis. "Now, have I stated the problem clearly? Have I brought about the solution in accordance with your royal Highness's expectations and wishes?"

"Yes, monsieur, yes; you have forgotten two things only."

"The first?"

"Let us speak of it at once with the same frankness we have used hitherto. Let us speak of the obstacles which may bring about the destruction of all our hopes. Let us speak of the dangers we face."

"They would be immense, infinite, terrifying, insurmountable if, as I have said, everything did not concur to make them non-existent. There are no dangers for you or for me if your royal Highness's daring and constancy equal that perfect resemblance to the King which nature has bestowed upon you. There are no dangers, I repeat, there are only obstacles, and that is a word, found in every language, which I have never been able to comprehend; and if I were king I would do away with it as absurd and useless."

"And yet there is an obstacle, monsieur, a very serious, an insurmountable danger which you forget."

"Ah!" exclaimed Aramis.

"There is the conscience that cries out, there is the remorse that tears the heart."

"Yes, that is true," replied the bishop; "there is weakness of purpose, as you remind me. Yes, you are right, it is indeed an immense obstacle. The horse which fears the ditch leaps into it and is killed! The man who crosses swords with another with trembling hand leaves loop-holes to the enemy's blade by which death enters. It is true! It is true!"

"Have you a brother?" said the young man to Aramis.

"I am alone in the world," cried the latter, with a voice as hard and spasmodic as a pistol-shot.

"But there is some one in this world whom you love?" added Philippe.

"No one! — yes, I love you."

The young man sank into a silence so profound that the sound of his own breath became a tumult to Aramis.

"Monseigneur," he resumed, "I have not said all that I had to say to your royal Highness. I have not offered to my prince all the salutary counsels and useful resources which I have at his disposal. It is not well to flash lightnings in the eyes of those who love darkness. It is not wise to rouse the thunder of cannon in the ears of the man who loves quiet and rural peace. Monseigneur, I have only your happiness in my thoughts; I will let it drop from my lips; gather it up tenderly, you who love the sky, soft meadows, and pure air. I know a country of delight, an unknown paradise, a nook where alone, free, and unknown you may forget, amidst woods, flowers, and falling waters, all those nothings which human folly — that temptress of God — has been spreading before you. Oh, listen, prince, I am not mocking you! I, too, have a soul, and

I can look into the depths of yours. I will not take you half-reluctant and cast you into the crucible of my own will, my own ambition. All or nothing! You are bruised, ill, exhausted by the fuller breaths you have had to draw during this first hour of liberty. This is an infallible sign to me that you cannot go on drawing breath in this freer air. Let us then confine ourselves to a humbler life, more suited to your strength. God is my witness that I desire to bring only happiness for you out of this ordeal to which you are being subjected!"

"Speak! speak!" said the prince, with a vivacity which gave Aramis cause for reflection.

"I know," resumed the prelate, "a canton in the Bas-Poitou of which no one in France suspects the existence. Twenty leagues, — an immense extent of country, is it not? — twenty leagues, monseigneur, entirely covered with water, herbage, and reeds, and studded here and there with wooded islands. These great marshes, clothed with reeds as with a dense mantle, sleep profoundly and silently under the smiling sun. A few fishermen, with their families, cross them idly on their great rafts of poplars or alders, whose floor is made of rushes, whose roof is woven of strong reeds. These barks, these floating houses, move back and forth at random as the wind blows them; when they touch the shore, it is by chance, and so softly that the fisherman who dozes is not wakened by the shock. If he seeks to land, it is because he espies a long flight of crails or lapwings, of wild duck or plover, of teal or woodcock, which fall an easy prey to his snare or his gun. Silver shad, monstrous eels, greedy pike, red and gray mullet fall in masses into his nets. He has only to choose the finest and let the rest escape. Never has the denizen of cities, the soldier, or traveller penetrated into this region. The sunshine is soft; in certain plots of solid earth the vine grows and nourishes with generous juices its black and white grape-clusters. Once a week a boat is sent to fetch from the communal oven the loaves of fresh, hot bread, with their tempting odor. There you could live like a lord of ancient times, rich in the possession of your hunting-dogs, your fishing-lines, your guns, and your beautiful house of reeds; you could live on the produce of the chase, in full security; you could thus pass tranquil years away, at the end of which, transformed, unrecognizable, you could challenge Heaven to reshape your destiny.

“There are a thousand pistoles in this bag, monseigneur; it is more than you need to buy up all this marsh-land; it is enough to support you there for as many years as you have days to live; it is more than you require to be the richest, the freest, and the happiest man in that country. Accept it as I offer it, sincerely, gladly. We can at once unharness two horses from this coach; the deaf-mute, my servant, will conduct you by night marches, sleeping through the day, to the region I have told you of, and I shall have at least the satisfaction of saying to myself that I have rendered my prince the service he chose. I shall have made one man happy; and shall have pleased Heaven more than by making one man powerful. And truly 't is a far harder task! Well, what say you, monseigneur? Here is the money. Nay, do not hesitate! In Poitou you will run no risks beyond that of catching a fever. And even of that the sorcerers of the country will cure you for your pistoles — whereas, in playing that other game, the one you know, you run the chance of being assassinated on a throne or strangled in prison. On my soul! now that I have weighed them both, — upon my life, I say! — I should hesitate.”

“Monsieur,” replied the young prince, “before deciding, let me alight from this coach, take a few steps on God’s earth, and listen to the voice in which he speaks to us through nature. Give me ten minutes, and I will answer you.”

“So be it, monseigneur,” said Aramis, bowing respectfully, — so solemn and august had been the tone in which these words were spoken.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CROWN AND TIARA.

ARAMIS had dismounted before the young man and was holding the coach-door open for him. He saw him press his foot upon the mossy ground with a thrill that shook his whole frame, and his first few steps, on leaving the carriage, were hesitating, almost stumbling; it seemed as if the poor prisoner were unused to treading God’s earth.

It was the 15th of August, and eleven o’clock at night; lowering clouds which threatened a storm had overspread the sky, and their heavy masses shut out all light and all perspec-

tion ; the openings at the ends of the forest-glades could barely be distinguished from the thickets on either side by a fainter tint of opaque gray amidst this dense obscurity. But the odors rising from the turf, and the keener and more penetrating fragrance which the oaks exhaled, the soft moist woodland atmosphere which enveloped him for the first time in many years, this ineffable taste of liberty in the boundless air, spoke with such an alluring voice to the prince, that for the first time he threw aside that mask of reserve — we might almost say of dissimulation — which he had worn hitherto, and, unable to restrain his emotion, breathed a deep sigh of joy.

Then, little by little, he raised his heavy head and drank in long draughts of air as it wafted its perfumes over his uplifted face ; he crossed his arms on his breast, as if to prevent his heart from bursting with this new delight ; he inhaled those mysterious breezes which wander at night beneath the dome of mighty forest boughs.

This sky which he beheld, these sounds of rushing waters, these creatures stirring about him, were not these the reality ? Was not Aramis mad to imagine that there was aught else to dream of in this world ?

That rapturous vision of country life, so free from cares, from restraint and fears, that ocean of happy days which flashes forever before the imagination of youth,— these were the baits wherewith to ensnare a wretched captive worn with treading the stones of a prison, blighted by breathing the scant air of the Bastille. It was this bait, we may remember, which Aramis had held out to him when offering the thousand pistoles and picturing the enchanted Eden, hidden from the eyes of men amid the deserts of Bas-Poitou.

Such were Aramis' reflections as he followed, with an anxiety impossible to describe, the silent progress of Philippe's emotions, as he saw him more and more lost in the depths of meditation. In truth, the young prince, wrapped in thought, scarcely touched the earth with his feet, while his soul, borne upward to the throne of God, was imploring a ray of light from above upon this inward conflict which involved life or death for him.

It was a terrible moment for the Bishop of Vannes ; never had he found himself brought face to face with such a dire alternative. Was this soul of steel, accustomed to overcoming

all obstacles, never finding itself inferior or vanquished, to be thwarted in so vast a scheme, merely through not having reckoned the influence wrought upon the human spirit by a few forest leaves bathed in the night air? Aramis, therefore, nailed to one spot by his torturing doubts, contemplated the agony of Philippe's wrestle with these two mysterious angels. This torture lasted throughout the ten minutes for which the young man had begged. During that eternity Philippe never ceased gazing up to heaven with sad, tearful, suppliant eyes; Aramis never ceased gazing at Philippe with a burning, eager glance.

Suddenly the young man bowed his head; his thoughts returned to earth, his face hardened perceptibly, his brow became furrowed, his mouth assumed an expression of fierce courage. Once more his gaze grew fixed, but now it reflected the flame of earthly splendors; now it was like the look of Satan upon the high mountain, when he showed Christ all the kingdoms of the earth and the glory thereof.

Aramis' eye became once more as gentle as it had been sombre.

Philippe, seizing his hand with a swift, nervous gesture cried :

"Come, let us go where we shall find the crown of France!"

"Is that your decision, prince?"

"It is my decision."

"An irrevocable one?"

Philippe did not even deign to answer; he looked the bishop in the face, resolutely, as if to ask him if it were possible for a man to go back upon a decision once made.

"Such looks as yours are strokes of fire which paint a character," said Aramis, bending over Philippe's hand. "You will be great, monseigneur, I answer for it."

"Let us, if you please, resume our conversation where we dropped it. I said to you then that I wished to come to an understanding with you upon two points: first, the dangers and obstacles we might have to encounter; that point is now settled. The other is this: what conditions do you impose upon me? It is your turn to speak, M. d'Herblay."

"What conditions, prince?"

"Doubtless you would not wish to stop me in my career for such a trifle; and you cannot do me the injustice to suppose that I believe you to be without self-interest in this matter.

Come, then! open your mind to me fearlessly and without subterfuge."

"I will do so, monseigneur. Once a king —"

"And when shall that be?"

"It shall be to-morrow evening — in the night, I mean."

"Explain to me how it will be brought about."

"First let me ask your royal Highness one question!"

"Speak!"

"I sent to your Highness a man in my service, to deliver to you a note-book containing instructions carefully drawn up, in order to acquaint your Highness with all the persons composing your court."

"I have read all these notes."

"Attentively?"

"I know them by heart."

"And understand them? Pardon me. I may venture to put that question to the poor abandoned prisoner of the Bastille. It is needless to add that within a week I shall have no questions to put to a mind like yours, rejoicing in the full freedom of its powers."

"Question me, then; I will gladly be the pupil reciting his lesson to a learned master."

"First as to your family, monseigneur."

"My mother, Anne of Austria? — all her sorrows, her painful malady? Oh, I know her — I know her!"

"Your younger brother?" pursued Aramis, bowing.

"You added to your notes such faithfully painted portraits that I can at once recognize each one of the persons whose character, manners, and history you have so carefully portrayed. Monsieur, my brother is a handsome, dark young man, with a pale face; he does not love his wife, whom I — Louis XIV. — formerly loved a little, and still coquette with, though she caused me bitter tears the day she dismissed La Vallière."

"You must beware of the latter's eyes," said Aramis. "She truly loves the actual King. It is difficult to deceive the eyes of a woman who loves."

"She is a blonde, with blue eyes whose tender glances will reveal her identity to me. She limps slightly; every day she writes me a letter, to which I reply through M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Do you know the latter?"

"As well as if I saw him before me. And I know his latest verses, as well as those I have composed in reply to them."

"Very good! and do you know your ministers?"

"Colbert, an ugly, dark-browed man, but full of intelligence; his hair growing low upon his forehead, a heavy massive head; the mortal enemy of M. Fouquet."

"As to Colbert, we need not concern ourselves."

"No, because, naturally, you will request me to exile him, will you not?"

Aramis, filled with admiration, contented himself with saying: "You will be very great, monseigneur."

"You see," added the prince, "that I have learnt my lesson thoroughly, and with Heaven's help and yours besides, I need not go wrong."

"There is still another pair of eyes which you will find troublesome, monseigneur."

"Yes, the captain of musketeers, M. d'Artagnan, your friend."

"My friend, I must say it."

"He who escorted La Vallière to Chaillot; he who delivered up Monk in a box to Charles II.; he who served my mother so faithfully; he to whom the crown of France owes so much that it owes everything. Would you request me to exile this man, too?"

"Never, Sire. D'Artagnan is a man to whom at a given moment I shall reveal all. But be on your guard, for if he should get on the track before that revelation, we shall both be slain or taken prisoners. He is a man of action."

"I will be on my guard. Tell me of M. Fouquet. What would you have me do with him?"

"One moment more, I beg, monseigneur, and pardon me if I seem lacking in respect by questioning you thus."

"It is your duty to do so, and it is also your right."

"Before we pass to M. Fouquet, I should feel scruples at neglecting to mention another friend of mine."

"M. du Vallon, the Hercules of France? As to him, his fortune is assured."

"No, it is not of him I wished to speak."

"Of the Comte de la Fère, then?"

"And of his son — the son of all four of us."

"That youth who is dying for love of La Vallière, of whom

my brother disloyally robbed him ! Be at ease, I shall find means of restoring her to him. But tell me one thing, M. d'Herblay ; do men forget injuries when they love ? Do they forgive the woman who has betrayed them ? Is that a French custom ? Is it a law of the human heart ? ”

“ A man who loves deeply, as Raoul de Bragelonne loves, ends by forgetting the crime of her he loves ; but I doubt if Raoul would forget.”

“ I shall look to it. Is that all you wished to say about your friend ? ”

“ That is all.”

“ Then we will return to M. Fouquet. What do you wish me to do for him ? ”

“ Let him be superintendent as before, I beg of you.”

“ So be it ! but he is now prime minister.”

“ Not quite that.”

“ A king as ignorant and perplexed as I will need a prime minister.”

“ Your majesty will need a friend.”

“ I have only one, that is yourself.”

“ You will have others by and by, but never one so devoted, so zealous for your glory.”

“ You shall be my prime minister.”

“ Not at once, monseigneur. It would cause too much surprise, and give umbrage to many.”

“ M. de Richelieu, the minister of state to my grandmother, Marie de Médicis, was simply Bishop of Luçon, as you are Bishop of Vannes.”

“ I see that your royal Highness has profited by my notes. Your marvellous perspicacity delights me.”

“ I know well that M. de Richelieu speedily became a cardinal through the queen's influence.”

“ It would be better,” said Aramis, with a bow, “ that I should be made prime minister only after your royal Highness has procured my nomination as cardinal.”

“ You shall be so two months from now, M. d'Herblay. But that is a small matter. Far from offending me by asking for something further, you would distress me by stopping there.”

“ I have indeed something further to hope for, monseigneur.”

“ What is it ? Speak ! ”

“ M. Fouquet will not continue forever at the head of affairs ; he will grow old quickly. He loves pleasure, which is still

compatible with his labors, thanks to the remnants of youth he enjoys; but this youth will vanish before the first sickness or the first sorrow. We can spare him sorrow, because he is a gallant man and a noble heart, but we cannot save him from the assaults of sickness. So that is settled. When you shall have paid all M. Fouquet's debts, and restored the finances to a sound condition, M. Fouquet may then remain king of his little court of poets and painters; we shall have made him rich. Then having become your royal Highness's minister of state I can attend to my own interests and yours."

The young man turned a questioning glance upon the speaker.

"M. de Richelieu, of whom we were just speaking," pursued Aramis, "made a great mistake through his fixed idea of governing only France. He allowed two kings—King Louis XIII. and himself—to sit upon the same throne, while he might have seated them more conveniently upon two separate thrones."

"Upon two thrones?" said the prince, thoughtfully.

"Yes, in truth," went on Aramis, quietly, "a cardinal, prime minister of France, aided by the favor and support of his Most Christian Majesty; a cardinal to whom the King, his master, lends his treasures, his army, his counsel,—such a man uses his double function to little purpose by applying it to France alone. You, moreover," added Aramis, with a piercing glance into Philippe's eyes, "will not be a king such as your father was—delicate, slow, and weary of everything—you will be king by your brain and by your sword. You will not find your own states enough for you; I should be a hindrance to you then. Now, our friendship must never know, I will not say a change, but even a flaw. I shall have given you the throne of France, you shall give me the throne of Saint Peter. When your firm, loyal, mailed hand shall grasp the brother-hand of such a pope as I shall be, neither Charles V., who ruled two-thirds of the habitable globe, nor yet Charlemagne, who ruled it all, shall reach to the height of your girdle. I have no alliances; I have no prejudices; I shall not drag you into persecutions of heretics; I shall not lead you into dynastic wars. I shall say: 'The universe between us, to me the souls, to you the bodies,' and as I shall die first, you will come into my heritage. What do you say to my scheme, monseigneur?"

"I say that you fill me with happiness and pride, M. d'Herblay, at the thought of merely comprehending you. Yes, you shall be a cardinal, you shall be my prime minister, and then you shall teach me what is to be done to secure your election as pope, and I will do all. Ask of me any pledge."

"It is not needful. I shall never act without your being the gainer thereby. I shall never rise without placing you on the round of the ladder above me. I shall always hold myself far enough from you to escape your jealousy, near enough to watch over your advantage and maintain our friendship. All the contracts in the world are violated because the interests they cover incline more to one side or the other. But never shall it be so between us. I need no pledges."

"And so — my brother — will disappear?"

"Very simply. We will remove him from his bed by means of a plank which yields to the pressure of the finger. Having fallen asleep beneath a crown, he will awake in a prison. From that moment you will rule alone, and you will have no more urgent interest than that of keeping me beside you."

"That is true. Here is my hand, M. d'Herblay."

"Permit me to kneel before you, Sire, with all due respect. We will embrace each other on the day when we shall both wear upon our brows, you a crown, I a tiara."

"Embrace me now, to-day; and be more than great, more than sagacious, more than sublime in genius; be good to me, be my father."

Aramis was nearly melted at these words. He felt something stirring in his heart, hitherto unknown to him, but this emotion soon died away.

"His father!" he thought. "Yes, his Holy Father."

And they reseated themselves in the coach, which sped rapidly along in the direction of Vaux-le-Vicomte.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CHÂTEAU OF VAUX-LE-VICOMTE.

THE château of Vaux-le-Vicomte, situated about a league from Melun, had been built by Fouquet in 1653. There was at that time but little money in France. Mazarin had taken it all, and Fouquet had spent the rest. Only as there are men whose very faults are productive and their vices useful, so Fouquet, while scattering his millions broadcast in embellishing this palace, had brought forward three remarkable men, Levan, the architect of the building, Le Nôtre, who designed its gardens, and Le Brun, who decorated the interior. If the château of Vaux had a defect, it was in an overgrandiose air and an excess of magnificence. It is proverbial to this day for its acres of roof, the restoration of which is the ruin of fortunes as reduced as those of our epoch. On entering Vaux-le-Vicomte by its great gates supported by caryatides, the main building opens before us upon a vast court of honor, girdled by deep moats which are enclosed by a magnificent stone balustrade. Nothing could be more noble than its central façades, lifted upon its broad flight of steps, like a king upon his throne, and surrounded by four pavilions, whose lofty Ionic columns rise majestically the whole height of the edifice. The friezes, adorned with arabesques, and the pediments crowning the pilasters, impart an air of richness and grace, while the domes surmounting all give breadth and majesty to the ensemble. This mansion, built by a subject, bore far greater resemblance to a royal residence than those palaces which Wolsey felt constrained to present to his master, lest he might excite his jealousy.

But if taste and splendor are displayed in one part of this palace more than another, if anything may be preferred to the sumptuous interior decorations, to the rich gildings, the profusion of paintings and statuary, it is the park and gardens of Vaux. The fountains, which were regarded as wonders in 1653, are still wonderful to-day, the cascades aroused the admiration of kings and princes; and as to the famous grotto, the theme of famous verse, the abode of that illustrious nymph of Vaux, whom Péllisson depicted as conversing with La Fontaine, we must be spared all description of its beauties, lest we

should awaken on our own account such criticism as Boileau meditated at the time :

*“ Ce ne sont que festons, ce ne sont qu’astragales —
Et je me salue à peine au travers du jardin.”*

We will do as Despréaux did ; we will enter the park which had been laid out but eight years before, and whose foliage, already superb, was turning crimson under the first rays of the rising sun. Le Nôtre had accelerated the pleasure of Mæcenas, all the nursery-gardens had furnished trees whose growth had been advanced by culture and fertilization. Every tree of fine promise in the neighborhood had been uprooted and transplanted in the park. Fouquet could easily buy trees to stock his park, since he had purchased three villages and their appurtenances in order to enlarge it.

M. de Scudéry said of this estate, that to water it M. Fouquet had divided a river into a thousand fountains, and reunited the thousand fountains into torrents ; M. de Scudéry says many other things in his “ *Clélie* ” concerning this palace of Valterre whose many attractions he minutely describes. It would perchance be wiser to send curious readers direct to Vaux rather than to the pages of “ *Clélie*,” although there are as many leagues between Paris and Vaux as “ *Clélie* ” has volumes.

This splendid mansion was now in readiness to receive “ the greatest king on earth.” M. Fouquet’s friends had transported hither, some their actors and scenery, some their equipment as painters and sculptors, others their carefully-mended pens — for many impromptus were in contemplation.

The cascades, not over-docile nymphs though they were, were pouring forth floods of water, clearer than crystal ; they showered the bronze tritons and nereids with their foaming waves, sparkling with rainbows in the sunlight.

An army of servants was rushing in squadrons through the courts and vast corridors, while Fouquet, who had only arrived that morning, moved about with a calm, observant glance, giving his last orders, after his stewards had inspected everything.

It was, as we have said, the 15th of August. The sun was pouring its burning rays straight down upon the shoulders of all these bronze and marble deities ; it heated the water in

their shells, and ripened in the orchards those magnificent peaches which the King remembered with regret fifty years later, when one day at Marly, finding a scarcity of some of the finer varieties in those gardens of his which had cost France double the sum that Vaux had cost Fouquet, the great King remarked to some one beside him: "Ah, you are too young to have tasted M. Fouquet's peaches!"

Oh, memory! Oh, trumpets of fame! Oh, glories of this world! He who could judge merit so well, he who had succeeded to the inheritance of Nicolas Fouquet, he who had taken from him *Le Nôtre* and *Le Brun*, he who condemned him to end his days in a prison of state, remembered only by his peaches this conquered, crushed, forgotten enemy. In vain had Fouquet squandered thirty millions upon his fountains, upon his painters and sculptors, and upon the writings of his poets, in order that he might be held in remembrance; a single ripe and blushing peach hanging on a trellis amid its long green leaves — this small fruit which a dormouse could nibble up without a thought — was all that awakened in the great King's memory the lamentable shade of the last superindent of France!

Feeling assured that Aramis had attended to all details, set guards at the gates, and provided accommodations for the guests, Fouquet confined his attention to the ensemble. Here Gourville was showing him the preparations made for the fireworks, there Molière was taking him over the theatre; and finally, having visited the chapel, the salons, the galleries, Fouquet was descending the staircase, worn out with fatigue, when he caught sight of Aramis, who beckoned to him. The superintendent rejoined his friend, who was standing in front of a great picture not yet finished. The painter, *Le Brun*, still wrestling with this canvas, bathed in sweat, stained with his colors, pale with weariness and inspiration, was dashing on the final touches with his rapid brush. It was the portrait of the King, attired in that court suit which *Percegrin* had condescended to show beforehand to the Bishop of Vannes.

Fouquet placed himself before this portrait which seemed to glow with life, in the freshness of its flesh-tints and its still moist colors. He gazed at the figure, calculated the labor it had cost, and in his wonder over it, esteeming no reward worthy of such a herculean task, he threw his arms about the painter's neck, and embraced him. The superintendent by this

deed ruined a coat worth a thousand pistoles, but he revived Le Brun's spirits. It was a happy moment for the artist, but a painful one for M. Percerin, who was walking behind Fouquet, and who had also paused to admire in Le Brun's picture the suit he had made for his Majesty, — a work of art, as he said, which had its equal only in M. Fouquet's wardrobe. His cry of distress was interrupted by the signal given from the roof of the mansion.

The sentinels of Vaux had perceived beyond Melun, in the open plain, the approaching *cortège* of the King and the queens; his Majesty was just entering Melun with his long train of coaches and cavaliers.

"In an hour," said Aramis to Fouquet.

"In an hour!" echoed the latter, with a sigh.

"And the people who ask one another what is the use of these royal fêtes!" pursued the Bishop of Vannes, with his forced laugh.

"Alas! I, who am not the people, am asking myself the same question."

"I shall give you an answer within twenty-four hours, mon-seigneur. Put on a cheerful countenance, for this is a day of rejoicing."

"Well, believe me or not, as you like, D'Herblay," said the superintendent, with ardor, pointing his finger at Louis' *cortège* upon the horizon; "he does not love me, nor do I greatly love him; but I know not how it is, the moment he is approaching my house —"

"Well, what then?"

"As he draws near, he grows more sacred in my eyes, he is my King, he is almost dear to me —"

"Dear? Yes," replied Aramis, playing upon the word, as did the Abbé Terray later with Louis XV.

"Do not laugh, D'Herblay; I feel that if he would allow me, I could love that young man."

"It is not to me you should say that, but to M. Colbert," rejoined Aramis.

"To M. Colbert?" cried Fouquet; "why to him?"

"Because he will perhaps grant you a pension from the King's treasury when he becomes superintendent."

Having launched this shaft, Aramis bowed.

"Where are you going?" asked Fouquet, with a gloomy look.

"To my own apartment, to change my costume, monseigneur."

"Where have you chosen your lodging, D'Herblay?"

"In the blue chamber, on the second floor."

"The one above the King's bed-chamber?"

"Yes, precisely."

"But what restraint you will be under there! You will not dare to stir!"

"All night, monseigneur, I read or sleep in my bed."

"And your attendants?"

"Oh! I have but one with me. My reader is quite sufficient. Adieu, monseigneur; do not overtire yourself. Keep fresh for the coming of the King."

"We shall see you? We shall see your friend Du Vallon, I hope?"

"I have given him a lodging beside me and he is now dressing."

Thereupon Fouquet, with a bow and smile, passed on, like a commander-in-chief about to visit his advance posts when the enemy has been signalled.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE WINE OF MELUN.

THE King had, in point of fact, entered Melun with the intention of merely passing through the city. The young monarch was athirst for pleasure. During the entire journey he had but twice caught a glimpse of La Vallière, and divining that he should have no opportunity to speak to her until night-fall in the gardens, after the ceremony of his reception had been gone through, he was in haste to take up his lodging at Vaux. But he had reckoned without his captain of musketeers, and also without M. Colbert.

Like Calypso, who could not console herself for the departure of Ulysses, our Gascon could not console himself for not having discovered why Aramis had made Percerin show him the King's new suits. "It is certain," he said to himself, "that a flexible mind like that of my friend the Bishop of Vannes did not do such a thing without an object," and he continued to cudgel his brain to no purpose.

D'Artagnan, thoroughly broken in as he was to all the court intrigues, — D'Artagnan, who knew Fouquet's situation better than Fouquet knew it himself, — had conceived the strangest suspicions upon the announcement of this fête, which would have ruined a rich man, and which became impossible, utter madness, for a man already ruined. Moreover, the presence of Aramis, summoned back from Belle-Isle and appointed inspector-in-chief by M. Fouquet; his persistent interference in all the superintendent's affairs; M. de Vannes' visits to Baise-meaux also, — all these suspicious circumstances had sorely perplexed D'Artagnan for several weeks.

"With men of Aramis' stamp," he said to himself, "one can only be the stronger sword in hand. As long as Aramis remained a soldier, there was some hope of mastering him, but since he has covered his cuirass with a stole, we are lost. But what is Aramis trying to do?" And again D'Artagnan meditated.

"Well! what matter, after all? If he is only seeking to overthrow M. Colbert — what else could he attempt?"

D'Artagnan scratched his forehead, that fruitful region which had brought forth so many and such great ideas. For a moment he harbored the thought of coming to an understanding with M. Colbert; but his friendship, and in days past, his oath, bound him too closely to Aramis. He recoiled from the idea; and besides, the financier was hateful to him. He thought of unburdening his mind to the King; but the King would not even comprehend these suspicions of his, which had less solidity than a shadow. He resolved, therefore, to address himself directly to Aramis the next time he met him.

"I will catch him between two candles, all of a sudden, face to face," said the musketeer to himself. "I will lay my hand upon his heart and he will tell me — what will he tell me? But he must tell me something, for, *mordieux!* there is some mystery beneath all this!"

Somewhat calmer, D'Artagnan made his preparations for the journey, and took every pains that the King's military household, still very inconsiderable in numbers, should be well commanded and well disciplined, to make up for its lack of size. The result of these efforts on the part of their captain was that on arriving before Melun the King placed himself at the head of the musketeers, the Swiss, and a picket of French guards. It was like a small army, and M. Colbert gazed at

these men-at-arms in great delight; he expressed a wish that they had been a third more in number.

"Wherefore?" said the King.

"To do greater honor to M. Fouquet, Sire," replied Colbert.

"Or rather to ruin him the faster," thought D'Artagnan.

The army thus presented itself before Melun, whose notables came out to meet the King, bringing him the keys of the town, and inviting him to enter the Hôtel de Ville and partake of the wine of honor.

The King, who had intended merely to ride through the city and proceed directly to Vaux, turned red with vexation.

"Who is the fool to whom I owe this delay?" he muttered between his teeth, while the chief magistrate was delivering an address of welcome.

"It was not I," replied D'Artagnan, "but I am quite positive it was M. Colbert."

Colbert, hearing his name, inquired: "What does M. d'Artagnan wish?"

"I wish to know if it was you who plunged the King into this *vin de Brie*?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Then it was you whom the King just called by some name or other."

"What name was it, monsieur?"

"How do I know? — oh, wait, it was idiot, — no, no, — it was fool, ass, stupid, — that is what his Majesty called the man who was responsible for his drinking the wine of Melun."

D'Artagnan, after delivering this broadside, quietly caressed his horse.

M. Colbert's great head seemed to swell to the size of a bushel.

D'Artagnan, seeing how ugly his wrath made him, did not stop half way. The orator was still going on with his discourse, while the King was growing redder and redder.

"*Mordoux!*" said the musketeer, coolly, "the King is about to have a rush of blood to the head. How the deuce did you hit upon this idea, M. Colbert? You certainly are not in luck."

"Monsieur," said the financier, drawing himself up, "the idea was inspired by my zeal for the King's service."

"Bah!"

"Monsieur, Melun is a city — an excellent one — which

pays good taxes, and where it is not worth while to cause discontent."

"Look at that now! I who am no financier saw only one idea in your idea."

"And what was that, monsieur?"

"That of venting your spleen on M. Fouquet, who is quite beside himself on his donjon-keep over yonder expecting us."

This was a home-thrust, and a hard one. Colbert was unhorsed by it, and retired, hanging his head. Fortunately the discourse was at an end. The King drank a draught of wine, after which the march was resumed through the city. The King bit his lips with rage, for night was coming on, and all hope of a walk with La Vallière had fled. To establish all the King's household at Vaux, with due formalities, would require at least four hours; therefore the King, boiling with impatience, was hurrying on the queens in order to reach there before nightfall; but at the moment of resuming the march fresh difficulties arose.

"Will not the King sleep to-night at Melun?" said M. Colbert in a low voice to D'Artagnan.

M. Colbert was ill-inspired this night in addressing himself to the chief of musketeers. The latter had divined that the King could not restrain his impatience. D'Artagnan did not wish the King to enter Vaux otherwise than well attended. He desired him, therefore, to be accompanied by his entire escort. On the other hand, he knew that any further delays would irritate that impatient spirit. How reconcile these contending difficulties? He accordingly took Colbert's word off his lips, and launched it at the King.

"Sire," he said, "M. Colbert asks whether your Majesty will not sleep to-night at Melun."

"Sleep at Melun? Why, in Heaven's name," cried Louis XIV., "sleep in Melun? Who the devil proposed such a thing, when M. Fouquet is expecting us to-night?"

"It was merely," spoke up Colbert, quickly, "my fear of causing your Majesty any delay, since etiquette requires that the King should enter no house save his own royal residences, until the troops' quarters have been marked out by the quartermaster, and the garrison properly distributed."

D'Artagnan listened with all his ears while he gnawed his mustache. The queens also listened. They were fatigued, and wished to sleep. They wished, too, to prevent the King

from walking by night with Saint-Aignan and the court ladies; for while etiquette required the princesses to keep their rooms, the ladies of honor, as soon as their service was over, were free to walk as much as they pleased.

It was evident, therefore, that all these rival interests gathering in vapors would necessarily produce clouds, and that clouds must bring on a tempest. The King had no mustache to gnaw; he was therefore biting the handle of his riding-whip. How was he to get out of this dilemma? D'Artagnan was looking amiable and Colbert sulky. Whom should he attack?

"We will consult the Queen," said Louis XIV., bowing to the royal ladies.

This graciousness on his part moved the heart of Maria Teresa, who was generous and kindly disposed, and who, being left to her own free will, replied respectfully, "I will follow the King's wishes, as always, with pleasure."

"How long will it take to reach Vaux?" asked Anne of Austria, halting over each syllable and pressing her hand to her aching breast.

"An hour for the coaches of your Majesty," replied D'Artagnan, "on these fine roads." The King looked at him. "And not more than a quarter of an hour for the King," he hastened to add.

"We should arrive before nightfall," said Louis XIV.

"But the time required to lodge the King's military household," objected Colbert, softly, "will make his Majesty lose all the advantage of his speed, however great it may be."

"Double ass that you are!" thought D'Artagnan; "if it were for my interest to demolish your credit, I could do it in ten minutes. If I were in the King's place," he added aloud, "in going to visit M. Fouquet who is a gallant gentleman, I should leave my escort behind me; I should go as a friend, attended only by my captain of the guards. I should thus become in my host's eyes all the greater and the more sacred."

The King's eyes shone with joy.

"That is good counsel, mesdames," he said; "we will go to see a friend as a friend. March as slowly as you like, gentlemen of the household; as for us, messieurs, forward!"

And he galloped ahead, followed by all the cavaliers. As for Colbert, he hid his sulky head behind his horse's neck.

"I shall get off," said D'Artagnan to himself as he galloped

along, "with a little talk to Aramis, this very night. And then M. Fouquet is a man of honor, *mordoux!* I have said so, and it must be so."

This is the way, towards seven o'clock in the evening, without trumpets, without advanced guards, without outriders or musketeers, the King presented himself before the great gate of Vaux, where Fouquet, being forewarned, had been waiting for half an hour, bareheaded, and surrounded by his household and his friends.

CHAPTER XL.

NECTAR AND AMBROSIA.

M. FOUQUET held the stirrup of the King, who, having dismounted, bowed graciously, and more graciously still held out his hand, which Fouquet, in spite of a slight resistance on the King's part, raised to his lips. The King wished to await in the outer court the arrival of the coaches, nor had he long to wait. The roads had been put in fine repair by the superintendent's orders, so that from Melun to Vaux there was hardly a stone to be found the size of an egg. Thus the coaches rolling along as if over carpet, brought the two queens and their ladies to Vaux by eight o'clock, without jolting or fatigue. They were received by Madame Fouquet, and at the moment of their arrival a light as bright as day burst forth from all the trees, the vases, and the marble statues. This magic spectacle lasted until their majesties had disappeared within the palace. All these marvels — which the chronicler has heaped up, or rather preserved in his pages, at the risk of rivalling the novelist — these splendors of vanquished night and subjugated nature, of every pleasure and luxury which could enthral senses and soul alike — all these Fouquet spread before his sovereign in this abode of enchantment, whose like no monarch in Europe could boast of possessing.

We will not describe the great banquet given to their majesties, nor the concerts, nor the fairy-like masques; we will content ourselves with depicting the changes which passed over the King's countenance — from the gay, open, beaming expression it wore at first, to the sombre, constrained, and irritated look it gradually assumed. He remembered his own

residence, with its meagre luxury, consisting only of the appurtenances of royalty, without belonging personally to the King.

The great vases of the Louvre, the antique furniture and plate of Henri II., of François I., of Louis XI., were nothing more nor less than historical relics, mere specimens of the art of an earlier day, the cast-off tools of the trade of kingship. Whereas, with Fouquet's possessions, the value was as much in the workmanship as in the materials. Fouquet ate from gold plate which artists of his own had cast and chiselled for him; Fouquet drank wines of which the King of France did not even know the names, and drank out of goblets each more precious than the whole royal cellars.

What could be said, moreover, of the halls, the tapestries, the pictures, the throngs of servants and officers of every description? What of the service in which, perfect order replacing etiquette, ease and comfort replacing rigid regulations, and the pleasure and satisfaction of the guest became the supreme law of all who obeyed the host?

This throng of servitors busy without noise, this multitude of guests less numerous than the servants, these myriads of viands, of gold and silver vases, these floods of light, these masses of unknown flowers for which the hot-houses had been despoiled, this harmonious whole, in short, which was but the prelude to the promised fête, ravished all the guests, who testified their admiration again and again, not alone by voice and gesture, but by their deep silence and rapt attention, that mute language of the courtier.

As for the King, his eyes were swollen and dilated; he dared not look at the Queen. Anne of Austria, always superior in pride to every living being, crushed her host by the withering contempt she showed for everything that was offered her. The young Queen, full of good-nature and curiosity, ate with a hearty appetite, praised Fouquet, and asked the names of various fruits which appeared upon the table. Fouquet replied that he did not know the names; the fruit came from his own hot-houses; he had often cultivated it himself, being interested in exotic horticulture. The King felt the delicacy of this reply; but he was only the more humiliated by it. He thought the Queen a little too familiar, and Anne of Austria a trifle too Juno-like. As for himself, his one aim was to keep on the chilly borders between extreme disdain and simple admiration.

But Fouquet had foreseen all this ; he was one of those men who foresee everything.

The King had expressly declared that so long as he remained under M. Fouquet's roof, he wished his repasts not to be conducted with the customary etiquette, and accordingly he would dine with the company ; but by a special attention of the superintendent's, the King's dinner was served apart, as it were, in the midst of the general table. This dinner, marvellous in its composition, comprised everything which the King habitually preferred. Louis therefore had no excuse — he, the finest appetite in his kingdom — for professing that he was not hungry.

M. Fouquet did better still ; he had seated himself at table, in obedience to the King's command, but as soon as the soups were served, he rose and waited upon the King himself, while Madame Fouquet placed herself behind the armchair of the queen mother. The disdain of Juno and the sulks of Jupiter could hold out no longer against such an excess of graciousness. The queen mother ate a biscuit dipped in a glass of San-Lucar wine, while the King ate of everything, remarking to M. Fouquet :

“It would be impossible, M. le Surintendant, to dine better than this.”

Upon which the whole court set to devouring what was set before them with such enthusiasm that it looked like a swarm of Egyptian locusts settling down on a field of young rye. This did not prevent the King, however, when his hunger was appeased, from becoming gloomy again, and his gloom was deep in proportion to the good humor he had felt called upon to show, and all the deeper for the deference which his courtiers had shown towards Fouquet.

D'Artagnan, who could eat heartily and drink deep without letting it appear, did not lose a mouthful, and yet contrived meanwhile to make a host of observations which he turned to profit.

The supper over, the King did not wish to lose his walk. The park was brightly illuminated ; the moon besides, as if she too were at the orders of the Lord of Vaux, was silvering the lakes and the tree-tops with her phosphorescent light. The air was balmy, the shadowy avenues were so smooth that they tempted the feet to tread them. The fête was now perfect, for the King, having met La Vallière at the turn of one of

the woodland paths, was able to clasp her hand and say, "I love you," without being overheard — except by M. d'Artagnan, who followed him, and M. Fouquet, who preceded him.

The night of enchantments wore on. The King at last asked the way to his chamber, and immediately all were astir. The queens retired to the sound of theorbos and flutes. The King found on the staircase his musketeers awaiting him, M. Fouquet having summoned them from Melun, and invited them to supper. D'Artagnan's suspicions were at once put to flight; he was weary, he had supped well, and wished for once in his life to enjoy a fête given by a real king. "M. Fouquet," he said to himself, "is the man for me."

The King was conducted with great ceremony to the chamber of Morpheus, of which we owe our readers some slight description. It was the most vast and beautiful room in the palace. Le Brun had painted, on the vaulted ceiling, the sad and the joyous dreams which Morpheus sends to kings as well as to mere mortals. The painter had enriched his frescoes with all the lovely visions to which sleep gives birth, with all its honeyed perfumes, its flowers and nectar, all the voluptuousness and repose it pours down upon the senses. It was a composition as suave and delicious on one side as it was sinister and terrible upon the other. The poisoned chalice, the glittering blade suspended over the head of the sleeper, sorcerers and phantoms in hideous masks, those half-shadows more terrible than flaming light or black darkness — all these formed a pendant to the more gracious images.

As the King entered this magnificent chamber, a shudder passed through him. Fouquet asked him the cause.

"I am drowsy," replied Louis, somewhat pale.

"Does your Majesty wish for your attendants at once?"

"No, I have several persons to talk with first. Let M. Colbert be summoned."

Fouquet bowed and left the room.

CHAPTER XLI.

IN WHICH GASCON MEETS GASCON.

MEANWHILE D'Artagnan had not been wasting his time; such indeed was not his habit. After inquiring for Aramis, he set out to search for him until he found him.

Now no sooner had the King reached Vaux than Aramis had retired to his chamber, doubtless to plan some new gallant entertainment with which to give pleasure to his Majesty. D'Artagnan, having sent up his name, found the Bishop of Vannes in a beautiful chamber on the second floor, called the blue-room on account of its hangings; he was in company with Porthos and several of the modern Epicureans. Aramis came forward to embrace his friend, and offered him the best seat; as it soon became evident that the musketeer was reserving himself for a private talk with Aramis, the Epicureans took their leave. Porthos alone did not stir; it is true that having dined well, he was fast asleep in his chair, so that the *tête-à-tête* was not disturbed by his presence. Porthos had a deep sonorous snore which formed a harmonious bass accompaniment to the conversation.

D'Artagnan felt that it was for him to open it. The encounter he had come to seek was a rude one; he therefore entered frankly upon his subject.

"Well, here we are at Vaux!" he said.

"Why, yes, D'Artagnan. How does this residence please you?"

"Greatly, and so does M. Fouquet."

"Is he not charming?"

"He could not be more so."

"They say that the King began by being somewhat cold to him, but that his Majesty soon grew more cordial."

"You did not notice it, then, since you say: 'they say so.'"

"No, I was engaged with those gentlemen who have just gone out in preparing for the play and the tournament which are to be given to-morrow."

"Ah, indeed! You are the organizer of these fêtes, then?"

"I am, as you know, a friend to all pleasures of the imagination; I have always been more or less of a poet."

"Yes, I remember your verses; they were charming."

"I have forgotten them; but I delight in learning the verses of others, when those others are named Molière, Péliſson, La Fontaine —"

"Do you know what idea occurred to me this evening at supper, Aramis?"

"No, tell me what it was, for I shall never be able to guess it; you have so many!"

"Well, the idea occurred to me that the true king of France is not Louis XIV."

"What?" cried Aramis, involuntarily, looking the musketeer full in the eyes.

"No, it is M. Fouquet."

Aramis breathed again and smiled.

"Ah! there you are, jealous like all the rest! I will wager that you caught that phrase from M. Colbert."

D'Artagnan, by way of throwing Aramis off his guard, proceeded to relate to him Colbert's misadventures with regard to the wine of Melun.

"He comes of an ugly stock, this Colbert!" said Aramis.

"Faith, yes!"

"When I think, too," added the bishop, "that the fellow will be your prime minister within four months —"

"Bah!"

"And that you will serve him as you did Richelieu, or Mazarin —"

"Or as you serve Fouquet," said D'Artagnan.

"With this difference, dear friend, that M. Fouquet is not M. Colbert."

"That is true," and D'Artagnan assumed an air of sadness. "But," he added a moment later, "why did you say that M. Colbert would be minister four months hence?"

"Because M. Fouquet will be so no longer," replied Aramis.

"He will be ruined, will he not?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Absolutely."

"Why does he give fêtes, then?" asked the musketeer, in a tone of such simple benevolence that the bishop was duped by it for a moment; "why did not you dissuade him from it?"

This latter remark was a little too much, and Aramis' suspicions were revived.

"The important thing is to keep in favor with the King."

"By ruining one's self?"

"By ruining one's self for him, yes."

"A singular calculation that!"

"Necessity!"

"I do not see it, my dear Aramis."

"But you must! You have certainly noticed M. Colbert's growing animosity, and that M. Colbert is driving the King on to rid himself of the superintendent?"

"Oh, yes! it stares one in the face."

"And that there is a cabal against M. Fouquet?"

"That is well known."

"What likelihood is there that the King would side against the man who has spent all he possessed to please him?"

"That is true," said the musketeer slowly, unconvinced, and anxious to lead the conversation into other channels. "There are follies and follies," resumed D'Artagnan, "and I do not like all these that you are committing."

"To what do you refer?"

"I grant you the supper, the ball, the concert and the comedy, the tournament and the fireworks, the illuminations and the gifts — all these are well and good; but are not these expenses enough? Was it necessary to re-clothe newly his entire household?"

"Quite true! I said the same thing to M. Fouquet, and he replied that if he were rich enough he would offer the King a château entirely new from the weather vanes to the cellars, new inside and out; and that the moment the King had departed he would burn it to the ground, so that no one else should ever use it."

"That is truly Castilian!"

"So I told him, and he added this: 'I shall hold him my enemy who advises me to spare expense.'"

"It is simple madness, and so is that portrait."

"What portrait?" said Aramis.

"That of the King; the surprise —"

"The surprise?"

"Yes, for which you carried away those samples from Percerin's." D'Artagnan paused. His shaft was fired; he had only to measure its effect.

"That was merely a graceful attention," replied Aramis.

D'Artagnan went straight to his friend, took him by both hands, and looking him full in the eyes: "Aramis," he said, "do you still love me a little?"

"Can you question it?"

"Good! Do me a service, then. Why did you take samples of the King's suit from Percerin?"

"Come with me, and ask poor Le Brun, who has been working over it for two days and nights."

"Aramis, that may be the truth for every one else, but for me —"

"Really, D'Artagnan, you surprise me."

"Be good to me. Tell me the truth. You would not wish a mishap to befall me, would you?"

"Dear friend, you are becoming incomprehensible. What the devil is it that you suspect?"

"Do you believe in my instincts? You believed in them once. Well, an instinct tells me that you have some secret project on hand."

"I? A secret project?"

"I am not sure of it."

"*Pardieu!*"

"I am not sure, but I could swear to it."

"Indeed, D'Artagnan, you give me deep pain. If I have, in truth, a project upon which I ought to keep silence, I must be silent to you, must I not? If I had one which I ought to reveal to you, you would have known it long before this."

"No, Aramis, no, there are projects which can only be revealed when the favorable moment arrives."

"Then, my good friend," replied the bishop, laughing, "it would seem that the favorable moment has not arrived yet."

D'Artagnan shook his head with a look of melancholy.

"Oh, friendship! friendship!" he exclaimed, "hollow name! Here is a man who, if I asked it of him, would let himself be cut in pieces for me."

"That is true," said Aramis, nobly.

"And this man, who would shed every drop of blood in his veins for me, will not open for me one little corner of his heart. Friendship, I repeat, is only a mockery and a delusion like everything bright in this world."

"Do not speak thus of our friendship," replied the bishop, in a tone of firm conviction. "It is not of the sort you are describing."

"Look at us, Aramis. Here we are three out of four! You deceive me, I distrust you, and Porthos sleeps! A fine trio of friends, are we not? a noble remnant!"

"One thing I can say to you, D'Artagnan, and I swear it upon the gospels. I love you as always. If I ever seem to distrust you, it is on account of others, not on account of you and me. In whatever I do, and in whatever I succeed you shall have part. Promise me the same favor! speak!"

"If I am not greatly deceived, Aramis, these are words which, pronounced at this moment, are full of generosity!"

"It is possible."

"You are conspiring against M. Colbert. If that is all, *mordoux!* tell me so at once. I have the instrument, I will pull the tooth!"

Aramis could not hide a smile of disdain which passed over his noble face.

"And if I were conspiring against M. Colbert, what harm in that?"

"Oh, no! that would be too small a matter for you; and it was not to overthrow Colbert that you asked for those samples from Percerin. Oh, Aramis! you and I are not foes, we are brothers. Tell me what you are about to undertake, and on the faith of D'Artagnan, if I cannot aid you, I swear to remain neutral."

"I am undertaking nothing," said Aramis.

"Aramis, a voice speaks within me and enlightens me; that voice has never deceived me. You are conspiring against the King."

"Against the King!" cried the bishop, affecting displeasure.

"Your face will not convince me. Against the King, I repeat."

"Will you come to my assistance?" pursued Aramis, with his ironical laugh.

"Aramis, I will do more than assist you, I will do more than remain neutral, I will save you."

"You are mad, D'Artagnan."

"I am the wiser of us two."

"You, to suspect me of seeking to assassinate the King!"

"Who spoke of that?" said the musketeer.

"Let us understand each other, then. I do not see what any one could do against a legitimate king such as ours except to assassinate him."

D'Artagnan made no reply.

"You have, besides, your guards and musketeers here," pursued the bishop.

"True!"

"You are not in M. Fouquet's house, but in your own."

"True again!"

"And you know that at this very hour M. Colbert is advising the King against M. Fouquet, just as you would perhaps counsel him if I were not of the party."

"Aramis! Aramis! in mercy's name, one word, as a friend."

"A friend's word is truth. If I meditate raising a finger against the son of Anne of Austria, the true King of this realm of France, if it is not my firm intention to bow before his throne, if in my thoughts to-morrow is not destined to be the most glorious of days for my King, may God's lightning strike me! I am ready!"

Aramis had pronounced these words with his face turned toward the alcove of his chamber, in which D'Artagnan, who, moreover, had his back to the alcove, could not suspect that any one lay concealed. The unction, the studied deliberation with which these words were pronounced, the solemnity of the oath, afforded the musketeer the most complete satisfaction. He took both of Aramis' hands in his and pressed them warmly.

Aramis had supported his reproaches without turning pale, but he blushed before his praises. D'Artagnan deceived did him honor, but D'Artagnan confiding put him to shame.

"Are you going?" he said, embracing him to hide his confusion.

"Yes, my service calls me; I have to take the watchword for the night."

"Where are you to sleep?"

"In the King's antechamber, it seems. And Porthos?"

"Oh! take him with you; his snoring is like a cannonade."

"Ah! he does not share your room, then?"

"Not at all. He has an apartment of his own, I know not where."

"Very good!" said the musketeer, whose last suspicion was put to flight by this separation of the two associates. He touched Porthos roughly on the shoulder; the latter replied by a roar.

"Come!" said D'Artagnan.

"What! D'Artagnan, dear friend, it is you? By what lucky chance — Oh! I remember, I am at the fête at Vaux."

"In your fine new suit!"

"Yes; it was very civil on the part of M. Coquelin de Volière, was it not?"

"Hush!" said Aramis, "you are treading heavily enough to break through the floor."

"Oh, true!" said the musketeer. "This chamber is directly over the dome."

"And I did not select it for a fencing hall," added the bishop.

"The King's chamber has upon its ceiling all the soft delights of slumber. Do not forget that my floor is the lining to that ceiling. Good-night, friends, in ten minutes I shall be sound asleep."

And Aramis accompanied them to the door, smiling pleasantly. Then, no sooner were they outside the door than, bolting it rapidly behind them, and closing up all chinks in the windows, he called: "Monseigneur! Monseigneur!"

Philippe appeared from the alcove, pushing aside a sliding panel behind the bed.

"He was full of suspicion, your M. d'Artagnan," he said.

"Ah! you recognized D'Artagnan, then?"

"Before you called him by name."

"He is your captain of musketeers."

"He is truly devoted to *me*," replied Philippe, emphasizing the pronoun.

"Faithful as a dog; but he bites sometimes. If D'Artagnan does not recognize you before *the other* disappears, you may rely upon D'Artagnan to all eternity; for then, if he has seen nothing, he keeps his fidelity; if on the other hand, he sees too late, he is a Gascon and will never admit that he has been deceived."

"So I thought. What are we to do now?"

"You are to put yourself at your post of observation to watch the King at the moment of retiring, so that you may see how to perform that little ceremony."

"Very good! Where shall I place myself?"

"On this folding chair. I will slip aside a panel in the floor, and you can look through this opening, which corresponds with one of the false windows in the dome of the King's chamber. Can you see now?"

"I see the King," and Philippe started as at the sight of an enemy.

"What is he doing?"

"He is inviting some man to sit down beside him."

"M. Fouquet?"

"No, it is not he; wait a moment —"

"The notes, prince, the portraits."

"The man whom the King is requesting to sit down is M. Colbert."

"Colbert seated in the King's presence!" cried Aramis. "Impossible!"

"Look for yourself."

Aramis peered down through the opening in the floor. "It is indeed Colbert," he said. "Oh, monseigneur, what are we about to hear, and what will be the results of this sudden intimacy?"

"It bodes no good for M. Fouquet, certainly."

The prince was not mistaken. We have seen that Louis XIV. had sent for Colbert, and that Colbert had arrived. The conversation between them had opened by one of the highest favors the King had ever accorded; it is true that he was alone with his subject.

"Colbert, be seated," he said. The intendant, overcome with delight, he who had been fearing a dismissal, refused this unprecedented honor.

"Does he accept?" asked Aramis.

"No, he remains standing."

"Let us listen, prince," and the future king and the future pope hung eagerly upon the words of these mere mortals whom they held in their power and beneath their feet, to be crushed at their pleasure.

"Colbert," said the King, "you caused me great annoyance to-day."

"Sire — I was aware of it."

"Good! I like that answer. Yes, you were aware of it. There was courage in what you did."

"I ran the risk of displeasing your Majesty; but I did not risk concealing from you your Majesty's real interests."

"What! you feared something on my account?"

"I did, Sire, if it were nothing more than an indigestion," replied Colbert, "for a subject does not offer such a banquet to his king unless it be to smother him under a weight of good cheer."

And having launched this refined jest, Colbert awaited pleasantly its effect on the King; and Louis XIV., the vainest and most fastidious man in his kingdom, forgave Colbert even this pleasantry.

"It is true," he said, "that M. Fouquet gave me too lavish a repast. Tell me, Colbert, where does he find the money necessary for his prodigious expenditures. Can you tell?"

"Yes, I know, Sire."

"You will be so good as to inform me, then."

"Easily, to the last farthing."

"I know that your calculations can be depended on."

"That is certainly the least quality to be required in an intendant of finance."

"They do not all possess it."

"I thank your Majesty for a tribute so flattering from your lips."

"M. Fouquet, then, is rich, exceedingly rich, and the fact is known to every one."

"Every one, Sire,— the living and the dead alike."

"What mean you by that, M. Colbert?"

"The living see M. Fouquet's wealth; they admire it as a result and applaud him; but the dead, who look deeper than we, know its source and accuse him."

"What is, then, the source of M. Fouquet's wealth?"

"Oh! an intendant's office often benefits those who occupy it."

"You have something of a more confidential nature to tell me; fear nothing, we are alone."

"I fear nothing at any time, Sire, being shielded by my conscience and under the protection of my king," said Colbert, bowing low.

"And so, if the dead could speak —"

"They speak sometimes, Sire. Read!"

"Ah!" murmured Aramis in the prince's ear, who was listening so intently as not to lose a syllable; "since you are here, monseigneur, to learn your trade of king, listen to this piece of truly royal infamy. You are about to witness a scene such as God alone, or rather the devil alone, can conceive and execute. Listen, then, and profit by it."

The prince redoubled his attention and saw Louis XIV. take from Colbert's hand a letter which the latter held out to him.

"The late cardinal's handwriting!" exclaimed the King.

"Your Majesty has an excellent memory," replied Colbert, bowing, "and it is a marvellous gift for a king, destined to great tasks, to be able thus to recognize handwriting at a glance."

The King read Mazarin's letter, which, being already known to the reader, since the disagreement between Madame de Chevreuse and Aramis, need not be repeated here.

"I do not fully understand this," said the King, deeply interested.

"Your Majesty has not yet the practice of clerks in the administration."

"I see that there is a question of money given to M. Fouquet."

"Thirteen millions — a considerable sum!"

"Most surely. But these thirteen millions must have caused a deficit in the accounts. That is what I do not understand, as I tell you. How was such a deficit possible?"

"Possible! perhaps not, but I assure you it was real."

"You say that these thirteen millions are lacking in the accounts?"

"I do not say so, but the registry does."

"And this letter of M. de Mazarin's indicates the use to which they were appropriated, and the name of the depositary?"

"As your Majesty can judge for yourself."

"Yes, and it follows from this that M. Fouquet has not yet restored the thirteen millions."

"That is evident from the accounts, undoubtedly, Sire."

"Well, and consequently —"

"Consequently, Sire, since M. Fouquet has not restored the thirteen millions, he must have appropriated them to his own use; and with these thirteen millions he is in a position to expend more than four times as much in pomp and munificence as your Majesty was able to do at Fontainebleau, where we spent but three millions, as you may remember."

For a bungler at diplomacy, this was an adroit stroke of baseness to evoke thus the remembrance of the fête where the King had, for the first time, thanks to a word of Fouquet's, been made conscious of his inferiority. Colbert received at Vaux the affront which Fouquet had given at Fontainebleau, and, like a good financier, he returned it with interest. Having thus predisposed the King's mind, Colbert had little left to do. He perceived it, for the King had become gloomy, and Colbert awaited his next word with an impatience as great as that of Philippe and Aramis in their post of observation.

"Do you know what results from all this, M. Colbert?" said the King, after a few moments' reflection.

"No, Sire, I do not know."

"It results that the misappropriation of these thirteen millions being once proved —"

"But it is so."

"I mean to say, being once declared, M. Colbert —"

"I think it might be so to-morrow, if your Majesty —"

"Were I not M. Fouquet's guest," rejoined the King, with dignity.

"The King is at home everywhere, and above all in houses which have been paid for with his money."

"It would seem," said Philippe, in a low voice to Aramis, "that the architect who built this dome, foreseeing to what use it would be put, ought so to have contrived it that it might fall upon the heads of scoundrels of so black a nature as this M. Colbert."

"I had thought of that," said Aramis, "but M. Colbert is so near the King at this moment!"

"True! it would open the succession."

"Of which Monsieur your brother would reap all the advantage, monseigneur. Therefore let us be still and continue to listen."

"We shall not listen long," said the young prince.

"Why so, monseigneur?"

"Because, if I were the King, I should no longer reply."

"And what would you do then?"

"I would wait until to-morrow to give myself time for reflection."

Louis XIV. at last raised his eyes, and finding Colbert waiting for his next word:

"M. Colbert," he said, abruptly changing the conversation, "I see that it is growing late; I must to bed."

"Ah!" exclaimed Colbert, "I thought that —"

"Till to-morrow. In the morning I shall have come to a decision."

"Very good, Sire," returned Colbert, incensed, although he controlled himself in presence of the King.

The King made a gesture of dismissal and Colbert retired backwards to the door.

"My attendants!" cried the King.

The king's attendants entered the apartment. Philippe was about to quit his post of observation.

"A moment longer," said Aramis, with his accustomed

gentleness of manner. "What has just taken place is merely a detail, and to-morrow we shall attach no importance to it; but the night service, the etiquette of the King's retiring, that, monseigneur, is of vital importance. Learn, learn how you must go to your bed. Look! Look!"

CHAPTER XLII.

COLBERT.

HISTORY will tell us, or rather history has told us, of the events of the morrow, of the splendid fêtes given by the superintendent to his King. Two great writers have preserved for us the memorable dispute which took place between "the fountain and the cascade," between "La Fontaine and the animals," as to which could afford the greatest pleasure.

Thus the day passed amidst joy and diversion; there was a promenade, a banquet, a comedy: and Porthos, to his great surprise, recognized "M. Coquelin de Volière" performing in the farce of "*Les Fâcheux*," as M. de Bracieux de Pierrefonds styled that play.

La Fontaine did not judge it in quite the same way, as we may see by the following lines, written to his friend, M. Maucron:

1 "*C'est un ouvrage de Molière.
Cet écrivain, par sa manière
Charme à présent toute la cour,
De la façon que son nom court
Il doit être par delà Rome.
J'en suis ravi, car c'est un homme.*"

As we perceive, La Fontaine had profited by Péliisson's advice and polished his rhymes.

Porthos shared in a measure La Fontaine's opinion, and would have said, with him: "*Pardieu!* this Molière is the man for me," but only in regard to costumes. In regard to

1 Here is a work of our Molière.
This writer by his style so rare
Has charmed the critics of the court,
And fame then carried the report
Till beyond Rome its echoes ran,
Rejoice with me: here is a man!

plays, as we have said, in the eyes of M. Bracieux de Pierrefonds Molière was merely a *farce*-writer.

But the King, still preoccupied with the scene of the night before, still letting the poison of Colbert's words ferment within him, — during the whole course of this day so crowded with brilliant, unexpected incidents, in which all the marvels of the "Arabian Nights" seemed to be conjured up before his eyes, — the King remained cold, reserved, taciturn. Nothing availed to draw a smile from him. It was evident that some deeply-buried resentment was rising within him as a mountain-brook swells to a torrent, fed by a thousand streams, and that in rising it had stirred up the depths of his being. Only as day wore on towards noon did he begin to resume some degree of serenity; it was as if he had come to a final resolution.

Aramis, who followed him step by step, in his thoughts as in his walks, concluded that the event which he awaited could not be long delayed. For once Colbert seemed to move in concert with the Bishop of Vannes, and if for every pin-prick with which he stung the King's heart, he had received an express order from Aramis, he could not have done better. All that day the King, evidently feeling the need of keeping off some dark thought that pursued him, sought the society of La Vallière as persistently as he fled from that of M. Colbert and M. Fouquet.

The evening came. The King had expressed a wish not to walk in the park until after cards, so between supper and the promenade they sat down to play. The King won a thousand pistoles, and having won them, put them in his pocket and rose, saying, "Gentlemen, to the park!"

He found the ladies already there. As we have said, he had won and pocketed a thousand pistoles; but M. Fouquet had contrived to lose ten thousand, so the courtiers had also benefited to the extent of a hundred and ninety thousand livres. Therefore the countenances of the officers of the King's household were the most joyous countenances in the world. Not so with that of the King, over which, in spite of his winnings, to which he was by no means insensible, there still spread a dark cloud. At the corner of one of the avenues, Colbert was waiting for him; doubtless the intendant was there by appointment, for the King, who had hitherto avoided him, now motioned him to approach, and they turned together toward the depths of the park.

But La Vallière had also observed the sombre brow and flaming eyes of the King, and as nothing which smouldered in his soul was impenetrable to her affection, she understood at once that this repressed wrath threatened some one. She therefore placed herself in the path of revenge like an angel of mercy.

Full of sadness, confused and half frantic at having been so long separated from her lover, agitated by this inward storm which she had divined, she showed herself at first to the King with such an air of embarrassment, that in his sombre mood the King interpreted it unfavorably.

Then as they were alone, or nearly so, — for Colbert, on perceiving the young lady, had withdrawn respectfully a few paces, — the King approached La Vallière, and took her by the hand.

“Mademoiselle,” he said, “may I, without indiscretion, ask what troubles you? Your breast is heaving and your eyes are full of tears!”

“Oh, Sire! if, indeed, I am agitated and my eyes are wet, if I am sad, as you say, it is with the sadness of your Majesty.”

“My sadness? Oh, you read me ill, mademoiselle. It is not sadness which is weighing upon me.”

“What, then, is it, Sire?”

“Humiliation.”

“Humiliation? Oh, what are you saying?”

“I say, mademoiselle, that where I am, none other should be master. Well, look about you, and see if I — the King of France — am not eclipsed before the king of these domains! Oh!” he continued, clinching his hands and teeth, “and when I think that this king —”

“What then?” said La Vallière, terrified.

“That this king is a faithless servant, who has grown proud on wealth stolen from me! But I will turn the fête of this insolent minister into mourning, which the nymph of Vaux, as his poets say, shall long remember.”

“Alas! your Majesty —”

“What, mademoiselle, do you take M. Fouquet’s part?” exclaimed Louis XIV., impatiently.

“No, Sire. I would only ask you if you are well informed? Your Majesty has learned more than once the worth of court accusations.”

Louis XIV. motioned Colbert to approach.

“Speak, M. Colbert,” said the young prince, “for in truth I

believe that Mademoiselle de la Vallière here needs your word to confirm the word of the King. Tell mademoiselle what M. Fouquet has done, and you, mademoiselle, have the goodness to listen. Oh! it will not be long."

Why did Louis XIV. insist thus? For a very simple reason: his heart was not at rest, his mind was not fully convinced. He divined some dark, obscure, tortuous intrigue beneath this story of the thirteen millions; and he wished to have the pure heart of La Vallière approve, if but by a single word, the resolution he had taken, and which he yet hesitated to carry into execution.

"Speak, monsieur," said La Vallière to Colbert, who had approached; "speak, since the King desires me to listen to you. Tell me what is the crime of which M. Fouquet is accused?"

"Oh, nothing very heinous, mademoiselle," he replied, with a lowering mien; "a mere abuse of confidence."

"Speak, speak, Colbert! and when you have told all, leave us, and go call M. d'Artagnan, for I have orders to give him."

"M. d'Artagnan!" cried La Vallière. "Why do you summon M. d'Artagnan, Sire? I implore you to tell me."

"*Pardieu!* to arrest this arrogant Titan, who, faithful to his device, threatens to scale my heaven!"

"Arrest M. Fouquet, do you say?"

"Ah! that surprises you."

"Under his own roof?"

"Why not? If he be guilty, he is as guilty here as elsewhere."

"M. Fouquet, who is ruining himself at this moment in striving to do honor to his King?"

"I believe, on my faith, that you are defending this traitor, mademoiselle."

Colbert laughed a low laugh. The King turned about at the hissing sound of this mirth.

"Sire," replied La Vallière, "it is not M. Fouquet I am defending, it is yourself."

"Me! — you defend me!"

"Sire, you dishonor yourself by giving such an order."

"Dishonor myself!" muttered the King, turning white with wrath. "In truth, mademoiselle, you speak with a strange passion."

"My passion is not in words, Sire, but in serving your Majesty," replied the noble girl. "I would give my life for that end if it were needed, and with the same passion."

Colbert tried to mutter something inarticulate. Thereupon La Vallière, that lamb of gentleness, turned with flashing eyes, and imposed silence upon him.

"Monsieur," she said, "when the King acts rightly, were it against me and mine, I am silent, but when the King would act wrongly, even to serve me and those I love, I must speak."

"But it appears to me, mademoiselle, that I too love the King."

"Yes, monsieur, we both love him each in our own way," replied La Vallière, with an accent which penetrated to the heart of the youthful King. "Only I love him so ardently that all the world knows it, so purely that the King himself does not doubt my love. He is my King and my master, I am his humble servant; but whoever touches his honor touches my life. I repeat, then, that those who counsel him to arrest M. Fouquet beneath his own roof, dishonor him."

Colbert hung his head, for he felt that the King had abandoned him; nevertheless, with bowed head, he murmured:

"Mademoiselle, I have but one word to say."

"Do not speak that word, monsieur, for I will not listen to it. Besides, what could you have to tell me? That M. Fouquet has committed a crime? I know it, since the King has said so; and from the moment the King has said: 'I believe,' I need no other lips to say: 'I affirm.' But were M. Fouquet the vilest of men, I say boldly that M. Fouquet is sacred to the King, since the King is his guest. Were his house a den of thieves, were Vaux a cavern of coiners and bandits, yet that house is sacred, his castle is inviolable since it shelters his wife; is an asylum which even executioners would not violate!"

La Vallière was silent. In spite of himself the King could not withhold his admiration. He was vanquished by the warmth of her tones and the nobleness of her cause. Colbert, on his side, gave way overwhelmed by the inequality of the struggle. At last the King drew a deep breath, shook his head, and held out his hand to La Vallière.

"Mademoiselle," he said gently, "why do you pronounce against me? Do you know what this wretch will do if I allow him breathing space?"

"Heavens! Is he not a prey always within your reach?"

"And if he should escape? If he should take to flight?" cried Colbert,

"Then, monsieur, it will be for the King's eternal glory to have let M. Fouquet escape; and the guiltier he has been the greater the King's honor will show against that baseness — that shame."

Louis kissed La Vallière's hand as he fell on his knees before her.

"I am lost," thought Colbert; then suddenly his face brightened. "Oh, no, no! not yet," he said, within himself, and while the King, hidden beneath the covert of an enormous linden, clasped La Vallière to his breast with the ardor of ineffable love, Colbert quietly fumbled in his pocket-book, and drew forth a paper folded in the form of a letter, somewhat yellow, perhaps, but evidently very precious, since the intendant smiled as he looked at it. Then he turned his malevolent glance upon the charming group formed in the shadow by the figures of the young girl and the King, faintly lighted up by the glare of approaching torches.

Louis saw the torchlights reflected upon Louise's white dress. "Leave me, Louise," he said, "for some one is approaching."

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle, some one is coming!" cried Colbert, in order to hasten the girl's departure.

Louise disappeared rapidly among the trees; then as the King rose from where he had been kneeling:

"Ah! Mademoiselle de la Vallière has dropped something," said Colbert.

"What is it?" asked the King.

"A paper, — a letter, — something white. Look there, Sire."

The King stooped hastily and picked up the letter, crumpling it in his hand. At the same moment the torches arrived, flooding the darkness of the scene with sudden light.

CHAPTER XLIII.

JEALOUSY.

THESE floods of light, the assiduities of this throng, this new attention on the part of Fouquet, came just in time to suspend the execution of a resolve which La Vallière had already shaken in the heart of Louis XIV. He was beginning to regard Fouquet with a sort of gratitude for having afforded La Vallière an occasion for revealing her generosity of soul, her power over his own heart. This was the moment for the crowning marvels of the night. Fouquet had barely time to conduct the King back to the château when a blaze of fire burst from the dome of Vaux, with a majestic thunder, and lighted up all the parterres of the garden as with the radiance of dawn. Colbert, standing some twenty paces aloof from the King—who was now surrounded and fêted by the masters of Vaux—seemed to be striving by the persistence of his baleful thoughts to recall Louis' attention from the magnificence of the spectacle.

Suddenly, as the King was on the point of holding out his hand to Fouquet, he felt in his palm the crumpled paper which La Vallière in her flight had apparently let fall at his feet. That most powerful of magnets, a thought of love, drew the young King back to the remembrance of his idol. By the light of the illumination, which still increased momentarily in beauty, and drew cries and shouts of admiration from all the villagers for miles around, the King read this letter, which he supposed to be a missive of love addressed by La Vallière to himself. But as he read, a deadly pallor overspread his face, and his look of deep-seated wrath, lighted up by these many-colored fires, would have inspired terror in all, could they have read the heart torn by such stormy passions. For him there was no further truce with his jealousy and rage. From the moment when the dark truth was revealed to him, every feeling of pity, of gentleness, of the sacredness of hospitality vanished. In the violence of the anguish that wrung his heart—still too weak to hide such suffering—he could scarcely restrain himself from giving a cry of alarm, and calling his guards about him. This letter, dropped by Colbert at the King's feet, was, as the reader has doubtless guessed, the same that

disappeared with the gray-beard, Toby, at Fontainebleau, after the attempt made by Fouquet upon La Vallière's heart. Fouquet saw the King's pallor without divining its cause; Colbert perceived his anger, and rejoiced at the approach of the storm. Fouquet's voice recalled the young prince from his fierce brooding :

"What ails you, Sire?" he asked, in his most gracious tones.

Louis made a violent effort to control himself, as he replied :
"Nothing."

"I fear that your Majesty is suffering."

"I am suffering indeed, monsieur, but as I have already told you, it is nothing," and without waiting for the end of the illumination the King turned towards the château. Fouquet accompanied him, and the rest of the company followed, leaving the last rockets to blaze sadly by themselves.

The superintendent sought to question Louis XIV. further, but could obtain no reply. He imagined that there had been a lovers' quarrel between Louis and La Vallière in the park; that the King, who was not apt to sulk, but was carried away by his passion, had taken a grudge against all the world because his lady was cruel to him. This idea sufficed to reassure Fouquet. He had even a friendly and consoling smile for the young King as he bade him good-night.

But for the King, all was not over; he had to submit to the usual ceremonies. The morrow was the day fixed for his departure, and etiquette required that the guest should thank his host, and give him at least a word of civility in return for the expenditure of his thirteen millions. But the most gracious words which the King could find to say to Fouquet, as he took his leave of him, were these :

"M. Fouquet, you shall hear from me. Send M. d'Artagnan to me, I beg."

And the blood of Louis XIII., so skilled in dissimulation, boiled in the veins of his son, who was as ready at that moment to have Fouquet's throat cut as his predecessor was to have Marechal d'Ancre assassinated. Thus he disguised the terrible resolution he had formed under one of those royal smiles, which are the lightning-flash preceding a *coup d'état*.

Fouquet took the King's hand and kissed it. Louis shuddered throughout his frame, but allowed his hand to touch M. Fouquet's lips.

Five minutes later D'Artagnan, to whom the royal order

had been transmitted, entered Louis XIV.'s chamber. Aramis and Philippe were in theirs, overhead, still listening, still eager and intent. The King did not wait for his captain of musketeers to approach his armchair; he hastened to meet him.

"Take care," he cried, "that no one enters here."

"Very good, Sire," replied the soldier, whose keen glance had for some time past analyzed the ravages in the King's countenance. And having given the order at the door, he returned to the King's side.

"Has anything occurred to disturb your Majesty?" he asked.

"How many men have you here?" demanded the King, without vouchsafing any reply to the other's question.

"For what purpose, Sire?"

"How many men have you?" repeated the King, stamping on the ground.

"I have the musketeers."

"What others?"

"I have twenty guards and thirteen Swiss."

"How many men do you require to —"

"To do what, Sire?" inquired the musketeer, with wide, calm eyes.

"To arrest M. Fouquet."

D'Artagnan fell back a step.

"To arrest M. Fouquet?" he burst forth.

"Are you, too, going to tell me that it is impossible?" cried the King, with cold, vindictive passion.

"I never say that a thing is impossible," replied D'Artagnan, wounded to the quick.

"Then do it!"

D'Artagnan turned on his heel without ceremony, and proceeded towards the door; it was but a short distance, and he cleared it in a half-dozen paces; then halting:

"Pardon, Sire," he said, "but I should have a written order for this arrest."

"For what purpose? Since when has the King's word been insufficient for you?"

"Because the word of a king when it springs from an impulse of anger may change when the impulse changes."

"No phrases, monsieur; you have another thought beneath that!"

"Yes, I always have thoughts; and thoughts which others

unfortunately have not," replied D'Artagnan, with cool impertinence.

The King, in the tempest of his wrath, fell back before this man, as the horse falls back on its haunches under the strong hand of the tamer.

"Your thought?" he cried.

"It is this, Sire: You order a man's arrest while you are beneath his roof: that is anger. When your anger is past, you will repent the step. Then I wish to be able to show you your signature; if it be too late for reparation, it will at least show us that a king does wrong to lose his temper."

"Wrong to lose his temper!" roared the King in a fury. "Did not the King my father lose his temper? did not my grandfather? Body of Christ!"

"The King your father, the King your grandfather, only lost their tempers when they were at home."

"The King is at home and master wherever he may be."

"That is the phrase of a flatterer, and can only proceed from M. Colbert. The King is at home in every man's house when he has driven the master out of it."

Louis bit his lip.

"What!" cried D'Artagnan. "Here is a man who has ruined himself in order to please you, and you wish to have him arrested. *Mordieux!* If my name were Fouquet, Sire, and they did that to me, I would swallow at a gulp ten of my own rockets and set fire to them and blow myself and every one else up to the sky. However, since you wish it, I go."

"Go!" said the King. "But have you men enough?"

"Do you think, Sire, I am going to take an army with me? To arrest M. Fouquet? Why, it is so easy a child could do it. Arresting M. Fouquet is like drinking a glass of wormwood. You make an ugly face and down it goes!"

"If he defends himself?"

"He? It is not likely! Defend himself when such a harsh measure makes a king and a martyr of him! Why, look you, if he still has a million, which I greatly doubt, I wager he would give it all to make such an ending. Well, Sire, I am going."

"Wait!" cried the King.

"Ah! what is it?"

"Do not make his arrest a public affair."

"That will be more difficult."

“Why so?”

“Because nothing is easier than to march up to M. Fouquet, in the midst of the thousand enthusiastic friends who surround him, and say: ‘I arrest you, monsieur, in the King’s name!’ But to go to him quietly, to follow him this way and that, to drive him into a corner of the chessboard where he cannot escape, to steal him away from his guests and keep him a prisoner for you without one ‘Alas!’ that he utters being overheard — that would be something really supremely difficult. Not one in a hundred could manage it.”

“Say once for all that it is impossible and it will be sooner over. *Mon Dieu!* must I always be surrounded by people who hinder my doing my will?”

“I hinder nothing, Sire. Is all said?”

“Guard M. Fouquet until to-morrow, when I shall have come to a decision.”

“It shall be done, Sire.”

“And be here when I rise for further orders. Now, leave me alone.”

“You do not even want M. Colbert, then?” inquired the musketeer, firing his last shot as he was going out.

The King started. Entirely absorbed by the thoughts of revenge, he had forgotten the ground of offence.

“No,” he cried, “no one; I will have no one here! Leave me.”

D’Artagnan left the room. The King himself closed the door behind him, and began to pace furiously up and down the room like a wounded bull in the arena, who drags after him the colored streamers and iron darts. At last he sought audible vent for his feelings.

“Ah, the miserable wretch! Not only does he plunder my finances, but with this stolen gold he corrupts my secretaries, friends, soldiers, artists — he even robs me of my mistress! Ah! that was why the faithless one defended him so bravely! It was gratitude — or, who knows? — it may have been love!”

He buried himself still deeper in these bitter reflections: “A satyr!” he thought, with that deep-seated scorn with which very young men regard those more advanced in life who still think of love; “a faun bent on gallantries who has never met resistance. A man adored by silly women whose love-tokens are gold and diamonds, and who has painters of his own to paint his mistresses in the guise of goddesses!”

The King trembled with passion as he went on : “ He pollutes everything for me. He ruins all that is mine. He will be my death. The man is too strong for me — he is my mortal enemy. He shall fall ! I hate him, I hate him, I hate him ! ” and as he uttered these words he struck the arm of the chair into which he had thrown himself with redoubled blows, then rose like one in a fit of epilepsy. “ To-morrow ! to-morrow ! Oh, the great day ! when the sun shall rise with me alone for rival, that man shall fall so low that all who see the ruin which my anger has wrought will be forced to own at last that I am greater than he ! ”

Then the King, no longer capable of mastering his passion, overturned with a blow of his fist a table standing beside his bed, and almost weeping, suffocated with pain, threw himself on his bed, fully dressed as he was, and bit the sheets as he lay writhing there trying in vain to find at least bodily repose. The bed creaked beneath his weight, and apart from a few gasping sighs which escaped the King’s tortured breast, no further sound was heard from the chamber of Morpheus.

CHAPTER XLIV.

HIGH TREASON.

THE paroxysm of fury which had seized the King on the perusal of Fouquet’s letter to La Vallière gradually subsided into painful exhaustion. But youth in its plenitude of life and health and its need for quickly restoring all losses — youth knows nothing of those endless nights of sleeplessness which renew for their victims the fable of Prometheus and the ever-gnawing vulture.

There where the man in the prime of life and vigor, where the aged man with his failing powers, find an incessant renewal of their sorrows, the youth surprised by a sudden revelation of evil, wears out his strength in cries of revolt, in frenzied struggles, and is the sooner overcome by the inflexible enemy he encounters. Once overcome, he no longer suffers.

Louis was subdued in a short half-hour ; he then ceased to clinch his hands and to scorch with his fiery glances the unattainable objects of his hatred ; he ceased to cast violent im-

precations at Fouquet and La Vallière; he fell from rage into despair, and from despair into prostration. After writhing for a few moments longer upon his bed, his arms fell inertly at his sides; his head dropped languidly back on his lace pillows; his weary limbs shivered, still agitated by slight muscular contractions, while his breast gave vent only to an occasional gasping sigh.

Morpheus, the god of slumber, who reigned supreme in the chamber called by his name, and towards whom Louis turned his eyes, reddened by passion and heavy with tears, — Morpheus showered down upon him all the poppies with which his hands were filled, till the King's eyelids softly closed and he fell asleep.

Then it seemed to him, as so often happens in that first slumber, so soft and light, which raises the body above the couch where it lies, the soul above the earth — it seemed to him that the god Morpheus, painted upon the ceiling, was gazing at him with human eyes; that something stirred and shone in the dome above him, that the swarm of ominous dreams, swept aside for a moment, gave place to a man's face with a hand over the mouth, bending down in an attitude of profound contemplation; and, strange to say, this man bore such a likeness to the King that Louis fancied he was looking at his own face in a glass. Only this face was saddened by a sentiment of deepest pity. Then it seemed to him that, little by little, the dome retreated, and that the figures, with their attributes of Le Brun's painting, grew dimmer as they receded more and more. A smooth regular motion, as rhythmic as that of a boat upon the waves, had succeeded to the immobility of the bed on which he was lying. The King was, doubtless, dreaming, and in his dream the crown of gold, which held the curtains together, receded from his vision, like the dome from which it was suspended, so that the winged genius, who held the crown in his hands, seemed to call vainly to the King, who was moving farther and farther away.

The bed was still sinking. Louis, with wide-open eyes, gave himself up to this cruel hallucination. At last the lights in the royal chamber began to burn dimly, and something cold, sombre, inexplicable seemed to invade the air. No more pictures, nor gold, nor velvet hangings were visible — nothing but dull gray walls, which the increasing gloom made darker each moment. And still the bed continued to descend, until after

a moment, which seemed like a century to the King, it struck a layer of black and icy air. There it stopped. The King could no longer see the light in his room, except as one might see the light of day from the bottom of a well.

"I am dreaming a frightful dream!" he thought. "It is time to awake. Come, I must awake!"

Every one has experienced this sensation; there is no one who in the midst of a stifling nightmare has not said to himself by the help of that light which burns on in the brain, where all human light is extinguished: "It is nothing, I am dreaming."

This was what Louis XIV. said to himself; but as he was saying, "I must awake," he perceived that he was not only awake, but that his eyes were wide open. Then he looked around him.

On his right hand and his left stood two armed men, each enveloped in a huge cloak and with the face hidden by a mask. One of these men held in his hand a small lamp whose smoky light revealed the saddest picture on which a King's eyes could dwell.

Louis said to himself that his dream was still going on, and that to dispel it he had only to move his arm and raise his voice. He sprang from the bed, therefore, and found himself upon the damp ground. Then he addressed the man who held the lamp: "What is this, monsieur? What means this jest?"

"It is no jest," replied, in a hollow voice, the masked figure who held the lantern.

"Do you belong to M. Fouquet?" demanded the King, in amazement.

"It matters little to whom we belong," said the phantom. "We are your masters, that is enough."

The King, more impatient than intimidated, turned to the second mask. "If this is a comedy," he said, "you may tell M. Fouquet that I regard it as unseemly and that it must cease."

This second mask, to whom the King had spoken, was a man of vast stature and huge circumference. He held himself erect and motionless as a block of marble.

"Well," added the King, with a stamp of his foot, "you do not answer."

"We do not answer you, my little monsieur," replied the giant in a stentorian voice, "because there is nothing to answer,

except that you are the first of the *fâcheux*, and that M. Coquelin de Volière forgot to include you among his personages."

"In a word, what do you want with me?" cried Louis, crossing his arms in wrath.

"You will know later," replied he who carried the lamp.

"Meanwhile, where am I?"

"Look!"

Louis looked accordingly; but by the light of the lamp which the masked man held up he could distinguish nothing but damp walls, upon which the silvery tracks of snails glimmered here and there.

"Ha! a dungeon?" cried the King.

"No, an underground passage."

"Leading where?"

"Follow me."

"I shall not stir from this spot!" exclaimed the King.

"If you play the mutineer, my young friend," replied the more robust of the two men, "I shall lift you in my arms and roll you up in my cloak; and if you smother, faith! so much the worse for you!"

And as he uttered these words, the speaker drew forth, from the folds of the cloak in which he was threatening to envelop the King, a hand which Milo of Crotona might have envied, on the day when the unlucky idea occurred to him of rending his last oak.

The King shrank from violence; for he realized that these two men who had him in their power had not gone so far with the idea of drawing back, and that, accordingly, they would carry out their scheme to the bitter end. He shook his head.

"I have fallen into the hands of assassins, it seems," he said. "Lead on!"

Neither of the men vouchsafed a reply to this speech; he who held the lamp led the way; the King followed, and the second masked man brought up the rear. In this order they traversed a long winding gallery, diversified with as many flights of steps as are to be found in the dark, mysterious palaces of Anne Radcliffe.

These many detours, in following which the King heard several times the trickling of water overhead, ended finally in a long corridor closed by an iron door. The man with the lamp unlocked this door with the aid of one of the keys hang-

ing from his belt which the King had heard jangling along the way.

As this door opened and admitted a breath of the outer air, Louis recognized the balmy odors which the forest exhales after a warm summer's day. He paused, hesitating for a moment, but his stalwart keeper thrust him forth from the underground passage.

"Once more," said the King, turning towards the man who had ventured on the audacious act of laying hands upon his sovereign, "what are you about to do to the King of France?"

"Try to forget that word," replied the man with the lamp, in a tone which no more admitted of reply than the famous decrees of Minos.

"You deserve to be broken on the wheel for the word you have just uttered," added the giant, as he extinguished the lamp which his companion handed him; "but the King is too humane."

At this menace Louis made a sudden motion as if about to flee, but the giant's hand descended on his shoulder and nailed him to the spot.

"But, in short, where are we going?" said the King.

"Come," replied the first of the two men, in a tone of respect as he led his prisoner towards a coach which seemed to be waiting for them. This coach was entirely concealed by the foliage; the two horses with their feet fettered were fastened by a halter to the lower branches of a mighty oak.

"Get in," said the same man, as he opened the coach door and let down the step. The King obeyed and seated himself in the carriage, whose padded door closed itself with a lock upon him and his companion. Meanwhile the giant was unfastening the straps which bound the horses, and having harnessed them himself he mounted upon the box, which was unoccupied. Instantly the horses set out upon a trot and turned into the Paris road; on reaching the forest of Sénart a relay was in waiting, the horses being fastened to a tree as before. The man upon the box reharnessed and proceeded rapidly along the road to Paris, which he entered towards three o'clock in the morning. The carriage followed the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, and having called out to the sentry, "By order of the King," the driver directed the horses into the circular enclosure of the Bastille, leading to the governor's court. Here

the horses were drawn up, reeking with sweat, at the entrance steps. A sergeant of the guard hastened up.

"Go and wake the governor," called the coachman in a voice of thunder.

Except for this voice, which could have been heard at the end of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, all remained as calm in the coach as in the château.

Ten minutes later M. de Baisemeaux appeared on the threshold in his dressing-gown.

"What is wanted?" he demanded, "and whom are you bringing me there?"

The man of the lantern opened the coach door and spoke two words to the driver. The latter got down at once from the box, seized a musket which lay at his feet, and placed its muzzle against the prisoner's breast.

"Fire if he speaks!" added aloud the man who was stepping from the carriage.

"Very good," replied the other, without any further observation. Having given this order, the King's captor ascended the steps, at the top of which the governor stood awaiting him.

"M. d'Herblay," cried the latter.

"Hush," said Aramis. "Let us go into your room."

"Good Heavens! what brings you here at this hour?"

"A mistake, my dear M. de Baisemeaux," replied Aramis, calmly, "it seems that it was you who were in the right the other day."

"On what subject?" inquired the governor.

"In regard to that order of release, dear friend."

"Explain what you mean, monsieur, — no, monseigneur, I mean," stammered the governor, suffocated by combined amazement and alarm.

"It is a simple matter enough. You remember, dear M. de Baisemeaux, their sending you an order to release a prisoner?"

"Yes, Marchiali."

"Well, in fact we all believed it to be for Marchiali, did we not?"

"Without doubt. Yet on the whole you remember that I *was* in some doubt about it. It was I who did not wish to let him go, and you who forced me to it."

"Oh! what a word that is you are making use of, dear Baisemeaux! I persuaded you, that was all."

"Persuaded me? yes, to deliver him up to you, and you carried him off in your own coach."

"Well, dear M. de Baisemeaux, it was an error. They recognized it as such at the ministry, and consequently I bring you an order from the King to liberate—that poor devil of a Scotchman, Seldon, you know."

"Seldon? You are quite sure this time?"

"Faith! Read for yourself," added Aramis, handing him the order.

"But this order," pursued Baisemeaux, "is the one I have already had in my hands."

"Really?"

"It is the very one I swore to you that I had seen that evening. *Parbleu!* I recognize the ink blot."

"I do not know whether it is the same one or not. All I know is that I have brought you this order."

"But what about the other, then?"

"What other?"

"Marchiali?"

"I have brought him back to you."

"But that is not sufficient. I must have a new order to receive him."

"Do not say such things as that, my dear Baisemeaux. You talk like a child! Where is the order you received in regard to Marchiali?"

Baisemeaux ran to his chest and brought it out. Aramis seized it, and coolly tore it into four pieces, held them up to the candle, and burnt them.

"What are you doing there?" cried Baisemeaux, at the highest pitch of terror.

"Consider the situation, my dear friend," pursued Aramis, with his imperturbable calmness, "and you will at once perceive how simple it is. You have no longer any order justifying the release of Marchiali."

"No. My God! I am a lost man!"

"Not at all, since I am bringing Marchiali back. From the moment that I bring him back to you it is all the same as if he had never got out."

"Ah!" cried the governor, completely stunned.

"Doubtless. You must lock him up at once."

"I should think so, indeed."

"And you will deliver up to me Seldon, who is released by

the new order. In that way your numbers will be made right."

"I — I —"

"You understand," said Aramis. "Very good!"

Baisemeaux wrung his hands.

"But why, in Heaven's name, after carrying off Marchiali, do you bring him back to me?" cried the wretched governor, in a paroxysm of misery and perplexity.

"For a friend like you, for so devoted a servant," said Aramis, "I have no secrets." And placing his lips close to the governor's ear: "You know," he went on, in a whisper, "what a resemblance exists between the unhappy wretch —"

"And the King; yes."

"Well, the first use that Marchiali made of his liberty was to maintain — guess what?"

"How do you expect me to guess?"

"To maintain that he was the true king of France."

"Oh, the wretch!" cried Baisemeaux.

"To assume garments precisely like those of the King and play the rôle of a usurper."

"Merciful Heaven!"

"That is why I have brought him back to you, dear friend. He is insane and airs his insanity before all the world."

"What is to be done with him, then?"

"It is a simple matter. Suffer him to communicate with no one. You understand that when his madness came to the ears of the King, who had taken pity on his misfortune and thus saw himself rewarded for his kindness by the blackest ingratitude, the King was furious. Accordingly — and attend closely to this, dear M. de Baisemeaux, for it concerns you vitally — accordingly, there is sentence of death decreed against all who shall allow him to communicate with any beside myself or the King in person. You hear, Baisemeaux, sentence of death."

"I hear very plainly, *monbleu*!"

"And now go out and conduct the poor devil back to his cell, unless you prefer bringing him up here first."

"For what purpose?"

"Yes, you are right, it is better to lock him up at once, is it not?"

"*Pardieu*!"

"Let us go, then!"

Baisemeaux ordered the drums to beat and the bell to be rung which warned every one to retire in order to avoid encountering a mysterious prisoner. Then as soon as the passages were cleared, he went down to take the prisoner from the coach, where Porthos, faithful to his orders, was still holding the musket to his breast.

"Ah, it is you, wretch!" cried Baisemeaux, upon perceiving the King. "Good! good!" and forcing the King to descend from the carriage he conducted him, — still accompanied by Porthos, who had never laid aside his mask, and by Aramis, who had resumed his, — to the second Bertaudière, and opened to him the door of the chamber in which Philippe had groaned for six long years.

The King entered the cell without uttering a syllable. He was pale and haggard. Baisemeaux closed the door upon him, gave a double turn to the key, and returning to Aramis, remarked :

"It is true, by my faith, that he looks like the King; not so much so, however, as you seem to think."

"In that case you would never have let yourself be taken in by the substitution of the one for the other."

"I should think not, forsooth."

"You are an invaluable man, my dear Baisemeaux," said Aramis. "Come, now, release me Seldon."

"True! I was forgetting that — I will give orders."

"Bah! to-morrow will be time enough."

"To-morrow? No, no, this very instant. Heaven defend me from delaying a second!"

"Very well! attend to your affairs, then. I shall look after mine. But you understand, do you not?"

"Understand what?"

"That no one is to enter the prisoner's cell except by a direct order from the King — an order that I shall bring myself."

"It is understood. Adieu, monseigneur."

Aramis returned to his companion.

"Come, come, friend Porthos, to Vaux! and at full speed!"

"A man is light of heart when he has served his king faithfully, and in serving him has saved his country," said Porthos.

"The horses will have no heavy load to draw. Let us be off!"

And the coach, relieved of the weight of a prisoner who might well have seemed to Aramis a heavy load, crossed the drawbridge of the Bastille, which was at once raised behind it.

CHAPTER XLV.

A NIGHT IN THE BASTILLE.

SUFFERING in this life is in proportion to human strength. We do not mean to affirm that the Creator always metes out to the forces of his creatures the anguish he gives them to endure; this would not be the truth, since God allots death, — often the only refuge of a human soul too hard pressed by bodily affliction. Suffering is proportioned to the strength in this sense that the weak suffer more, from a like affliction, than the strong. And of what elements does human strength consist? Is it not above all made up of habit, practice, experience? This we need not take the trouble to demonstrate; it is an axiom in morals as in physics.

When the young King, stupefied and utterly broken down, found himself thrown into a cell in the Bastille, he fancied at first that death is like sleep and has its dreams; he fancied that his bed had broken through the floor of his chamber at Vaux, that death had resulted, and that, following out the dream which had come to him while still a King, he — Louis XIV. — was dreaming in death one of those horrors impossible in life, which are called the dethronement, imprisonment, and degradation of a once mighty king.

To look on — an embodied phantom — at his own martyrdom; to float in unfathomable mystery between semblance and reality; to see all, to hear all, without confusing the smallest details of his agony — “Is not this,” thought the King, “a torture the more intolerable since it might be eternal?”

“Is this what is called hell — is this eternity?” murmured Louis XIV. as the door closed upon him. He no longer looked around, but leaning against the wall of this chamber abandoned himself to the terrible consciousness of death, and kept his eyes closed lest he should see things more awful still.

“How did I come by my death?” he said to himself in this half-frenzy. “Was my bed let down by some secret contrivance? But no — I felt no jar, no shock. Did they not rather poison me at supper, or by the fumes of wax, as they poisoned my great-grandmother, Jeanne d’Albret?”

Suddenly the chill of this chamber fell like a mantle about Louis’ shoulders.

"I saw my father," he said, "lying in state upon his bed, clad in his royal robes. That pallid face so sunken and so calm, those dexterous hands become so still, those stiffened limbs, — nothing of all that spoke of a sleep peopled by dreams; and yet what dreams might not God have sent to haunt that bed! — that death preceded by so many others whom he had sent to eternal death! — But no, that king was still a king, he throned it still upon that funeral bed as upon the chair of state. He had abdicated no jot of his majesty. The Almighty, who had no punishment for him, cannot thus punish me who have done no wrong."

A strange sound attracted the prisoner's attention. He looked up and saw on the chimney piece, above an enormous crucifix roughly painted in fresco, a rat of monstrous size engaged in gnawing a dry crust, while it fixed its bright curious eyes upon this new fellow-captive. The King was seized with terror and disgust at this sight, he recoiled towards the door with a loud cry, and as if this cry, escaping from his own breast, were all that was needed to restore his sense of identity, Louis at once knew himself to be alive and in possession of reason and consciousness.

"A prisoner!" he cried, "I — I — a prisoner!" He looked about for a bell with which to summon aid.

"There are no bells in the Bastille," he exclaimed, "and it is in the Bastille that I am confined. Now, how is it that I have been made prisoner? It is without doubt a plot of M. Fouquet's. I was drawn to Vaux as into a trap. But M. Fouquet cannot be alone in this business. His accomplice — that voice was M. d'Herblay's. I recognized it. Colbert was right. But what does Fouquet design to do with me? Will he reign in my place? Impossible! who knows?" pursued the King, with yet deeper gloom, "my brother, the Duke of Orléans, may have conspired against me, as my uncle was conspiring all his life against my father. But the Queen? my mother, too? and La Vallière? Oh, La Vallière! She has been delivered over to Madame, perchance; yes, it must be so, poor hapless child! She is in confinement like me, we are parted forever!" and at the bare idea of this separation the unhappy lover broke forth in tears, sobs, and imprecations. "There is a governor here," he cried in fury. "I will appeal to him. I will summon him!"

He called loudly, but no voice replied. He seized a chair and tried to batter down the massive oak door. The wood

resounded upon the wood of the door and awoke lugubrious echoes down the long corridors, but no human creature answered, none. This was an added proof to the King of the slight esteem in which he was held in the Bastille. Then, when his first rage had subsided, having noticed a grated window, through which entered a ray of gold which must be the first gleam of dawn, he began to call through the bars, first softly, then more loudly, but with no response. Twenty times he repeated the attempt, still without success.

At this the prince's blood began to boil and to mount to his head. Accustomed to command, his nature revolted at the thought of being thus defied. His anger swelled by degrees, he broke in pieces the chair, too heavy for his hands to hold, and used it as a battering-ram against the door. He struck so often and with such force that the perspiration ran from his brow. The noise became an immense and continuous din; now and then a stifled cry made answer to it. This sound produced a strange effect on the King's mind. He paused to listen. These were the voices of prisoners, formerly his victims, now his companions. These voices mounted like a cloud of vapor through the heavy ceilings, through the massive walls. They reproached the author of this tumult as doubtless their sighs and tears had often reproached the author of their captivity. After having robbed all these victims of their liberty the King had come hither to rob them of their slumbers. This thought drove him well-nigh mad. It redoubled his strength, or rather the power of his will, thirsting to obtain some explanation — something final. Once more he attempted to batter down the door. After an hour spent thus Louis heard a noise in the corridor outside his door, and a violent blow directed against the door itself caused his blows to cease.

"What is all this? Are you mad?" cried a coarse, rough voice. "What has got hold of you this morning?"

"This morning!" thought the King, in amazement; then he added civilly: "Monsieur, are you the governor of the Bastille?"

"My good fellow, your brain is cracked," replied the voice, "but that is no reason for making such an uproar. Be silent, *mordieu!*"

"Are you the governor?" demanded the King once more. He heard a door shut; the turnkey had departed without even deigning to reply. When the King became convinced of this

departure his fury knew no bounds. Agile as a tiger, he bounded from the table to the window-ledge and shook the bars; he smashed a pane of glass which fell crashing into a thousand fragments on the pavement of the court-yard. He shouted until he was hoarse: "The governor, here! the governor!" This fit of fury lasted for an hour, and was like an access of high fever. With his hair dishevelled and matted upon his forehead, with his garments torn and whitened, his linen in shreds, the King desisted only when his strength gave out; and not till then did he realize the pitiless density of these walls, cemented together like adamant, invincible save by the tooth of time, while he had for tool naught save despair.

He leaned his head against the door and stilled by degrees the tumult of his heart, which would have burst with one more such pulsation.

"The moment will come," he said, "when they will bring me the food given to all prisoners. I shall see some one, then. I shall speak; they must listen to me."

And the King searched his memory to recall at what hour the first daily meal was served to prisoners in the Bastille. He was ignorant even of this detail. It smote him like a dagger-thrust, his remorse at having lived for five-and-twenty years in freedom and happiness, a king, without having once given a thought to the sufferings of those who were unjustly deprived of their liberty. A blush of shame rose to the King's cheek, and he felt within his heart that God had permitted this terrible humiliation in order to render to the man the self-same torture which that man had inflicted on so many others.

No thought could have been more efficacious in awakening religious emotions in this soul prostrated by grief. But Louis dared not kneel and offer up a prayer to his Maker that his trial might soon end.

"God's will is just," he said, "It would be cowardly in me to ask of Him what I have so often denied to my fellow-men."

He had reached this point in his reflections — that is to say, in his agony — when the former noise was repeated outside his door, followed by the grinding sound of the key turning in the lock and the bolts drawn back. The King made a spring forward to reach the person who was about to enter, but, suddenly reflecting that such a movement was unworthy of a King, he drew back, assumed a calm and noble attitude, such as came easily to him, and waited with his back turned to the

window in order to conceal in some degree his agitation from the new-comer. It was merely the turnkey bearing a basket of provisions. The King gazed at him anxiously and waited until he should speak.

"Ah!" cried the jailer, "I see you have smashed your chair. I thought as much; but you must have been out of your senses."

"Monsieur," said the King, "take care what you say; the consequences may be of great moment to you."

The man set down his basket on the table and stared at the speaker.

"Eh! what!" he exclaimed in surprise.

"Tell the governor to come to me," added the King, with dignity.

"Look here, my son," said the jailer, "you have always been well-behaved, but madness makes a man ugly and we must give you a warning; you have broken a chair to pieces and made an uproar: that is conduct which is punished by a dungeon. Promise me not to do it again, though, and I will not inform the governor."

"I wish to speak to the governor," replied the King, without flinching.

"He will have you thrown into a dungeon. Take care!"

"I wish it. Do you hear?"

"Ah, there are your eyes getting wild again! Good! I shall take away your knife."

And the turnkey did as he said, closed the door, and departed, leaving the King more bewildered, more wretched, more alone than ever. In vain did he try once more his battering on the door, in vain did he fling the plates and dishes out of the window; not a sound answered him.

Two hours later he would have passed no longer for a king, a gentleman, a man, a human being; he was a madman tearing out his nails against the doors, trying to dig up the floor of his cell, uttering such frightful cries that the old Bastille seemed shaken to its foundations for having dared to revolt against its master. As for the governor, he had not even disturbed himself. The turnkeys and sentries had reported to him. But what mattered it? Were not madmen an every-day matter in the fortress, and were not the walls strong enough to resist them?

M. de Baisemeaux, deeply impressed by all that Aramis had told him, and convinced that he was acting in strict conformity

to orders, asked nothing better than that the madman, Marchiali, should be mad enough to hang himself to the canopy of his bed or to one of his window bars. In fact, this prisoner was not a very profitable one, and gave far more trouble than he was worth. These complications between Seldon and Marchiali, this confusion of orders and counter-orders, this problem of an annoying likeness would thus find a convenient solution. Baisemeaux even fancied that such a *dénouement* would not be altogether displeasing to M. d'Herblay.

"And then, really," remarked Baisemeaux to his major, "an ordinary prisoner is quite wretched enough at being a prisoner; he suffers sufficiently to make it an act of charity to hope for his death. All the more when the prisoner has gone mad and may bite, and make a disturbance in the Bastille. Then, by my faith! it is not merely charity to wish him dead, but it would be a benevolent deed to assist in putting him quietly out of his misery." Thereupon the worthy governor sat down to his second breakfast.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE SHADOW OF M. FOUQUET.

D'ARTAGNAN, still weighed down by his interview with the King, kept asking himself if he were actually in his right mind, if the scene had really taken place at Vaux, if he, D'Artagnan, were indeed the captain of musketeers and M. Fouquet the owner of the château in which Louis XIV. had been so hospitably entertained. These reflections were not those of a man who had been drinking too deep, and yet there had been high feasting at Vaux, and the superintendent's wines had figured prominently at the banquet. But the Gascon was a cool-headed man, and he knew not only how to handle his steel blade, but how to assume the coldness of that blade on state occasions.

"Come, now!" he said to himself, as he left the royal apartment; "here I am mixed up historically with the destinies of the King and of his minister; it will be written down that M. d'Artagnan, a cadet of Gascony, took by the collar M. Nicolas Fouquet, superintendent of the finances of France. My de-

scendants, if I should have any, will make a great reputation out of this arrest, just as the De Luynes made themselves powerful with the property of the luckless Maréchal d'Ancre. It is now a question of executing the King's order with propriety. Any man could say to M. Fouquet: 'Your sword, monsieur!' but not every man could guard M. Fouquet without making an outcry. How can it be managed so that the superintendent shall pass from the height of favor to the depths of disgrace; shall see Vaux changed all at once into a dungeon; and after inhaling the incense of Ahasuerus, shall hang as high as Haman, that is to say, — as Enguerrand de Marigny?"

Here D'Artagnan's brow darkened; the musketeer had scruples. To deliver up to death (for undoubtedly Louis XIV. hated Fouquet) a man whom he had just proclaimed a gallant gentleman was a matter of conscience with him. "It strikes me," pondered D'Artagnan, "that if I am not a villain I shall make known to M. Fouquet the King's project in regard to him; on the other hand, if I betray my master's secret, I am a scoundrel and a traitor, and guilty of a crime admirably provided for by martial law; and by the same token, I have seen poor wretches swing a score of times in the wars for doing on a small scale what I am meditating on a large one. No, no, a man of wit ought to find a much neater way out of this dilemma. Granted, now, that I have wits! a doubtful matter, though, since I have been expending them these forty years too prodigally to have a pistole's worth left."

D'Artagnan thereupon buried his head in his hands, tore his mustache in his vexation, and added: "Why has M. Fouquet fallen into disgrace? For three reasons: first, M. Colbert does not love him; second, he tried to make love to Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and third, the King loves both Mademoiselle de la Vallière and Colbert. He is a lost man! But shall I put my foot on his neck — I, a man — when he has thus fallen beneath the intrigues of women and clerks? Fie upon it! If he be indeed dangerous I shall pull him down, but if he be only persecuted — we shall see! I have reached that point where neither king nor commoner can prevail over my own judgment, and if Athos were here he would see it as I do. Therefore instead of going brutally up to M. Fouquet, laying hold on him bodily, and shutting him up, I shall endeavor to conduct the affair like a man of good breeding. It

will be talked about, but it shall be talked of well." And D'Artagnan, drawing up his shoulder-belt by a gesture peculiar to him, marched straight off to M. Fouquet, who, after having taken leave of the ladies, was preparing to sleep peacefully upon the triumphs of the day.

The air was still perfumed, or infected, as we please to put it, with the odor of fireworks; the candles were almost burnt out, the garlands were dropping their petals, and through the salons rare groups of dancers and courtiers were dispersing one by one.

In the midst of a circle of friends, with whom he was exchanging compliments, stood the superintendent with weary, half-closed eyes. He was longing for repose and ready to sink down upon the bed of laurels which he had heaped up for himself, — or it may be that his head was drooping beneath the load of debt he had contracted to do honor to this fête.

At last M. Fouquet withdrew to his chamber, still smiling, although half dead. He could no longer listen, he could no longer see, his only craving was for his bed and sleep. The god Morpheus, ruler of the dome where Le Brun had painted him, was extending his influence over the adjoining chambers and shedding his most slumbrous poppies over the master of the house. M. Fouquet had just placed himself in the hands of his *valet de chambre*, when D'Artagnan appeared on the threshold of his room.

D'Artagnan had never succeeded in becoming a commonplace figure at court; in spite of his being seen constantly he produced an effect of his own always and everywhere. It is the privilege of certain natures, akin in this to the lightnings and the thunders. They are known of all, yet their appearance startles, and each time they are seen and heard the impression seems stronger than ever before.

"What! M. d'Artagnan!" cried Fouquet, whose arm was already out of his sleeve.

"At your service," replied the musketeer.

"Come in, come in, dear M. d'Artagnan!"

"Thank you."

"Have you come to give me your criticism upon our fête, you who have such ingenious brains?"

"Oh, no; not at all!"

"Are you hampered in any way in the discharge of your duties?"

"Not in the least."

"You are not comfortably lodged, perhaps?"

"Oh! admirably!"

"I thank you heartily, then, for your amiability, and am under obligations to you for your flattering words."

This speech signified emphatically, "My dear D'Artagnan, pray go to bed, since you have a bed, and allow me to do the same." But D'Artagnan did not seem to have understood.

"Are you going to retire already?" he said to the superintendent.

"Yes; have you anything to communicate to me?"

"Nothing, monsieur, nothing. You sleep here, then?"

"As you perceive."

"Monsieur, you have given the King a very beautiful fête."

"You think so?"

"Superb!"

"The King is pleased, then?"

"Enchanted."

"Has he requested you to inform me so?"

"He would not have selected so unworthy a messenger, monseigneur."

"You do yourself injustice, M. d'Artagnan."

"Is this your bed here?"

"Yes; why that question? Are you not satisfied with yours?"

"Shall I speak frankly?"

"Most assuredly."

"Well, then, I am not."

Fouquet started. "M. d'Artagnan," he said, "take my room."

"And deprive you of it, monseigneur? Never!"

"What is to be done, then?"

"Will you permit me to share it with you?"

M. Fouquet stared fixedly at the musketeer.

"Ah! ah!" he said, "you have just come from the King?"

"Yes, directly, monseigneur."

"And the King wishes you to sleep in my chamber?"

"Monseigneur—"

"Very good, M. d'Artagnan, very good. You are the master here."

"I assure you, monseigneur, that I do not wish to abuse—"

M. Fouquet turned to his valet. "Leave us," he said. The

man left the room. "You have something to say to me, monsieur?" remarked the superintendent.

"I?"

"A man of your good sense does not come to talk with a man like me at such an hour without a serious motive."

"Do not question me."

"On the contrary, what do you want with me?"

"Nothing but your company."

"Let us go out into the garden, then," said Fouquet, suddenly, "or into the park."

"Oh, no!" replied the musketeer, hastily.

"Why not?"

"The cold night air —"

"Come, confess that you are here to arrest me," said the superintendent to the captain.

"Never!" exclaimed the latter.

"To keep guard over me, then?"

"A guard of honor, yes, monseigneur."

"Of honor? — that is another matter! Ah! I am arrested, then, in my own house?"

"Do not say that!"

"On the contrary, I shall cry it aloud!"

"If you cry aloud, I shall be forced to impose silence."

"Good! Violence beneath my own roof! This is well!"

"We do not seem to understand each other at all. Look, there is a chess-board; pray let us have a game, monseigneur."

"M. d'Artagnan, I am in disgrace, then?"

"Not at all — but —"

"But I am forbidden to withdraw from your sight?"

"I do not understand a word you are saying, monseigneur. If you wish me to retire, say so."

"Dear M. d'Artagnan, all this formality will drive me mad. I was dropping with sleep, you have fully roused me."

"I shall never forgive myself; and if you wish to reconcile me with myself, you will lie down and sleep, now before my eyes. I shall be enchanted."

"Ah! under guard?"

"I will leave you then."

"I no longer understand you."

"Good-night, monseigneur," and D'Artagnan made a feint of retiring, but M. Fouquet ran after him.

"I shall not lie down," he said, "and since you refuse to

treat me like a man, and are trying to dally with me, I will drive you to bay as a hunter does a wild boar."

"Bah!" cried D'Artagnan, affecting to laugh.

"I will order my horses and drive to Paris," said Fouquet, sounding the heart of the captain of musketeers.

"Ah, in that case, monseigneur, it is a different matter."

"You arrest me?"

"No, but I go with you."

"That is enough, M. d'Artagnan," resumed Fouquet, coldly.

"It is not for nothing that you have such a high reputation as a man of wit and resource, but all that is wasted on me. Come to the point at once; do me that service. Why are you arresting me? What have I done?"

"Oh! I know nothing as to what you have done; and moreover I am not arresting you — to-night."

"To-night!" cried Fouquet, turning pale; "but to-morrow?"

"We have not reached to-morrow yet, monseigneur. Who can ever answer for the morrow?"

"Quick! quick! captain. Let me have speech with M. d'Herblay."

"Alas! that is out of the question, monseigneur. I have orders to see that you converse with no one."

"But with M. d'Herblay, captain, — your friend!"

"Monseigneur, may it not be, by chance, my friend M. d'Herblay, of all others, with whom I ought to prevent your communicating?"

Fouquet colored, and assumed an air of resignation:

"Monsieur," he said, "you are right. I have received a lesson which I ought not to have provoked; a fallen man is entitled to nothing, even from those whose fortune he has made; still less from those to whom he has never had the good fortune to be of service."

"Monseigneur!"

"It is true, M. d'Artagnan, you have always borne yourself admirably towards me, always as became a man who was destined to arrest me. You at least have never asked anything of me."

"Monseigneur," replied the Gascon, touched by this eloquent and dignified misfortune, "will you give me your word of honor that you will not attempt to leave this room?"

"Of what use would it be, dear M. d'Artagnan, since you

are guarding me? Do you fear lest I should struggle against the most valiant sword in the kingdom?"

"It is not that, monseigneur; but I am about to go and fetch M. d'Herblay to you, and consequently to leave you alone."

Fouquet uttered a cry of surprise and joy.

"Going to fetch M. d'Herblay! To leave me alone?" he cried, clasping his hands.

"Where does M. d'Herblay lodge? In the blue room?"

"Yes, my friend, yes."

"Your friend? Thank you for that word, monseigneur; you give me that title to-day, if you have never given it to me before."

"Ah, you have saved me!"

"It will take ten minutes at least to go from here to the blue room and back, will it not?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Fully that."

"And to wake Aramis, who sleeps soundly when he sleeps, to put him on his guard, will take five minutes more; total, an absence of a quarter of an hour. Now, monseigneur, pledge me your word of honor that you will in no way seek to escape, and that I shall find you here on my return."

"I pledge it, monsieur," replied Fouquet, while he grasped the musketeer's hand in affectionate gratitude.

D'Artagnan vanished. Fouquet waited with visible impatience until the door had closed behind him, then threw himself upon his keys, opened several secret drawers concealed in different pieces of furniture, searched in vain for certain papers which had probably been left behind at Saint Mandé, and which he seemed disturbed at not finding, and then hurriedly seizing all the letters, contracts, papers of all sorts which he found, he piled them together and burned them in haste upon the marble hearth not even taking the trouble to remove the flower-pots which encumbered it. Then, this operation accomplished, like a man who has escaped some great danger, and whose strength fails him as soon as it is over, he fell exhausted into his arm-chair.

D'Artagnan on reëntering the room found Fouquet in the same position in which he had left him. The worthy musketeer had never entertained a doubt that Fouquet having pledged his word would fail to keep it; but he had expected that the superintendent would utilize his guard's absence in



FOUQUET BURNED THEM IN HASTE UPON THE MARBLE HEARTH.

getting rid of all the papers, notes, and contracts which might compromise the master of Vaux in the grave situation in which he already found himself. Therefore, throwing back his head like a dog who has found the scent, the musketeer sniffed that odor of smoke which he had expected to find in the air, and having found it, gave a nod of satisfaction.

On D'Artagnan's entrance, Fouquet on his side had raised his head too, and not one of D'Artagnan's movements had escaped him.

Then the eyes of the two men met, and each perceived that he had understood the other without the interchange of a word.

"Well!" spoke Fouquet first, "and M. d'Herblay?"

"Faith! monseigneur," replied D'Artagnan, "M. d'Herblay must be very fond of nocturnal promenades, for he seems to be wandering about the park of Vaux in the moonlight, making verses with some of your poets. He is not in his room."

"What! not in his room?" exclaimed Fouquet, whose last hope was put to flight; for without stating to himself very clearly in what manner the Bishop of Vannes could aid him, he was yet convinced that he could look for aid from him alone.

"Or at least, if he was there," continued D'Artagnan, "he had reasons of his own for not replying."

"But did you not call to him, monsieur, in such a way that he was sure to hear you?"

"You do not surely imagine, monseigneur, that having already exceeded my orders, which forbade my leaving you for an instant, I should be mad enough to rouse the whole house and allow myself to be seen in the corridor with the Bishop of Vannes; so that M. Colbert might ascertain positively that I was giving you time to burn your papers?"

"Burn my papers?"

"Doubtless. At least that is what I should have done in your place. When any one opens a door for me, I make haste to avail myself of it."

"Yes, it is well; I availed myself of it, and I thank you."

"And quite right, *morbleu!* We all have our little secrets which concern no one else. But to return to Aramis, monseigneur —"

"Well, as I was saying, you must have called him too softly, so that he failed to hear you."

"However softly one calls Aramis, monseigneur, Aramis always hears, if it is for his interest to hear. I repeat, then,

either Aramis was not in his room or he had reasons of his own for not recognizing my voice — reasons of which I am ignorant, and of which you may possibly be ignorant also, however much the Lord Bishop of Vannes may be a liegeman of yours.”

Fouquet heaved a sigh, rose, took two or three turns around the room, and finally seated himself, with an expression of extreme dejection, upon his magnificent bed with its velvet hangings bordered with the costliest laces.

D’Artagnan, meanwhile, gazed at Fouquet with a feeling of profound compassion.

“I have seen many men arrested in my lifetime,” said the musketeer, in a tone of melancholy; “I saw M. de Cinq-Mars arrested, and M. de Chalais. I was young then. I saw the arrest of M. de Condé and the princes, of M. de Retz and of M. Broussel. Well, monseigneur, I am sorry to say it, but of all these people, the one you most resemble at this moment is Goodman Broussel. You are not far from doing what he did: putting your napkin in your portfolio and wiping your mouth on your papers. *Mordieux!* M. Fouquet, a man like you should not be so cast down. What if your friends were to see you now?”

“M. d’Artagnan,” replied the superintendent, with a smile full of sadness, “you do not understand; it is precisely because my friends cannot see me that you see me as I am now. I am not one who lives to himself; alone I am nothing. Remember that I have spent my life in making friends of whom I hoped to make my stay and support. In my prosperity all these happy voices — happy through me — surrounded me with a perpetual chorus of praise and gratitude. If I fell into slight disfavor, these humble voices mingled harmoniously with the murmurs of my heart. Isolation I have never known! As for poverty, — that phantom of which I have at times had glimpses, clad in tatters, awaiting me at the end of my road! poverty, that spectre with which many of my friends have trifled for years past, poetizing her, caressing her, teaching me to love her! poverty! — I accept her, I recognize her, I greet her as a disinherited sister; for poverty is not loneliness, is not exile, is not a prison. Could I ever be poor with friends like Pélisson, like La Fontaine, like Molière? With a mistress like — oh! but solitude for me, the man of tumult, the man of pleasure, for me who only exist because others exist around me! Oh, if you but knew how alone I am at this moment! And how

you appear to me — you who are severing me from all I love — like an image of solitude, of annihilation, of death !”

“ But I have already begged you, M. Fouquet,” replied D’Artagnan, touched to the heart, “ I have already begged you not to exaggerate this matter. The King loves you.”

“ No,” said Fouquet, shaking his head, “ no !”

“ M. Colbert hates you, indeed.”

“ M. Colbert ! what matters that ? ”

“ He will ruin you.”

“ Oh ! as for that, I defy him. I am ruined already.”

At this strange avowal on the part of the superintendent of finance, D’Artagnan threw an expressive glance around him. Although he did not open his lips, Fouquet understood him so well that he added, “ What can one do with these magnificent possessions when one is no longer magnificent ? Do you know of what service these things are to us who are rich ? They serve to disgust us by their very splendor with all that does not equal that splendor. Here is Vaux, you will say, with all its marvels. What then ? What do these marvels avail me ? Once ruined, how am I to pour water into the urns of my naiads, fire into the breasts of my salamanders, air into the lungs of my tritons ? In order to be rich enough, M. d’Artagnan, one must be exorbitantly rich.”

D’Artagnan shook his head.

“ Oh ! I know what you would say !” replied Fouquet, quickly. “ If you owned Vaux you would sell it and buy an estate in some remote province — an estate with woods, orchards, and fields, which would certainly support its master. Out of forty millions you could doubtless realize — ”

“ Ten millions,” interrupted D’Artagnan.

“ Not a million, my dear captain. No man in France is rich enough to purchase Vaux at two millions and maintain it as it is. No one could do it — no one would know how.”

“ Well, after all !” exclaimed D’Artagnan, “ a million is not precisely poverty.”

“ It is not far from it, my dear monsieur.”

“ How so ? ”

“ You do not understand — no, I will not sell my residence of Vaux — I will give it to you, if you wish.”

And Fouquet accompanied these words with an indescribable movement of the shoulders.

“ Give it to the King ; you would be making a better bargain.”

"The King does not need that I should give it to him," replied Fouquet; "he will take it from me with perfect ease whenever it pleases him. That is why I prefer that it should perish. Look you, M. d'Artagnan, if the King were not at this moment beneath my roof, I would take this candle, I would go beneath the dome and set fire to a couple of cases of rockets and fusees which were kept in reserve there, and I would reduce my palace to ashes."

"Bah!" exclaimed the musketeer, indifferently. "In any event, you could not burn up the gardens. They are the finest thing you have here."

"And yet," resumed Fouquet, hoarsely, "what am I saying? Good Heavens! Burn down Vaux! destroy my palace! But Vaux is not mine. No, these marvels, these splendors belong, so far as their passive enjoyment goes, to him who paid for them, it is true, but so far as their enduring possession is concerned, they belong to those who created them. Vaux belongs to Le Brun, to Le Nôtre, to Péllisson, to Levau, to La Fontaine; Vaux belongs to Molière whose, '*Fâcheux*' was performed here; Vaux belongs to posterity, in short. So you see, M. d'Artagnan, that I have not even a house of my own."

"That is good," said D'Artagnan, "I like that idea, and I recognize M. Fouquet in it. This idea of yours takes me far enough from Goodman Broussel, and I no longer recall the whinings of the old Frondeur. If you are indeed ruined, monseigneur, carry it off with a brave front. You too, *mordoux*! belong to posterity, and you have not the right to belittle yourself. Look at me! I may seem to exercise a sort of superiority over you from the fact that it is I who arrest you; but Destiny, who distributes their parts to the actors in this comedy of life, has bestowed on me a far less brilliant and agreeable rôle than yours has been. I am one, look you, who esteem the part of a king or a potentate far above that of a lackey or a beggar. It is better worth while even on the real stage, as well as on that of the world, to wear a fine coat and mumble fine speeches than to scrub the floors, or have one's backbone caressed with a stick. In a word, you have squandered wealth, you have commanded and enjoyed; while I have dragged my tether, have obeyed and suffered. Well, after all, little as I am worth compared with you, monseigneur, I declare to you that the memory of what I have done acts as a spur to me and prevents my bowing my old head too

soon. I shall jog on to the end, a good troop-horse, and end in the saddle, falling stiff and straight, alive to the last. Do like me, M. Fouquet; you will be none the worse for it. Such a chance as this comes only once to men like you; the great thing is to do it well when the time comes. There is a Latin proverb of which I forget the words, but I remember the sense, for I have meditated on it more than once; it runs: 'The end crowns the work!'"

Fouquet rose from his seat, came and threw his arm round D'Artagnan's neck, and strained him to his breast, while with the other hand he clasped the musketeer's hand.

"A noble sermon," he said, after a pause.

"A soldier's sermon, monseigneur."

"You care for me, then, since you say such things to me."

"It may be."

Fouquet remained silent for a moment, then spoke again.

"But M. d'Herblay, where can he be?"

"Ah! where indeed?"

"I dare not beg you to send and fetch him here."

"If you were to beg me, I would not do it again. It is imprudent, M. Fouquet, it would be found out, and Aramis, who has no concern in this affair, might be compromised and involved in your disgrace."

"I must wait for daylight," said Fouquet.

"Yes, that will be best."

"What shall we do when daylight comes?"

"I know nothing about that, monseigneur."

"Grant me a favor, M. d'Artagnan!"

"Most willingly."

"Do you keep guard over me! I will remain here; you are acting in strict fulfilment of orders, are you not?"

"Certainly I am."

"So be it, then! Keep as close to me as my shadow. I prefer that shadow to another." D'Artagnan bowed. "But forget that you are M. d'Artagnan, captain of musketeers, forget that I am M. Fouquet, superintendent of finance, and let us talk over my situation."

"*Peste!* a thorny matter!"

"Truly?"

"Yes, but for you, M. Fouquet, I would do the impossible."

"Thanks. What did the King say to you?"

"Nothing."

"Ah! that is the way you talk it over with me."

"Oh, the deuce!"

"What do you think of my chances?"

"Nothing."

"And yet, if you would but show a little good-will —"

"Your position is a difficult one."

"In what respect?"

"In respect of your being in your own house."

"Difficult though it be, I understand it clearly enough."

"Doubtless! But do you imagine that with any one else I should have shown such frankness?"

"What! you call this showing frankness, you who have refused to open your lips?"

"Such consideration, then!"

"Ah, that I admit."

"Listen, then, monseigneur; this is how I should have proceeded with any one but yourself. I should have come to your door when your people had all gone, or if they had not gone I should have waited till they came out and seized them one at a time like rabbits in a trap; then having locked them up noiselessly, I should have laid myself down on the carpet of your corridor, and, one hand upon you without your suspecting it, I should have kept you for the master's breakfast. In that fashion, no scandal, no resistance, no noise! but also no warning to M. Fouquet, no reserve, none of these delicate concessions which courteous people make to each other at decisive moments. How do you like this method?"

"It makes me shudder."

"Does it not? It would have been grievous if I had appeared before you to-morrow without preparation and asked for your sword."

"Oh! monsieur, I should have died of rage and shame!"

"Your gratitude is far too eloquent; I have done nothing to merit it, believe me."

"On my word, monsieur, you will never make me admit that."

"Very well, monseigneur, if you are satisfied with me, if you have recovered from the shock which I softened as much as I could, let us leave Time to flap his wings awhile. You are harassed; you have many things to think over. I conjure you, therefore, sleep, or make a semblance of sleeping on your bed or in your bed. As for me, I go to sleep in this armchair,

and when I have once dropped off I sleep so soundly that the roar of cannon would not wake me."

Fouquet smiled.

"That is to say," continued the musketeer, "that I make an exception as to the opening of a door, whether secret or visible, whether it be to go out or to come in. Oh, as to that sound my ears are vulnerable to the last degree! The least creaking startles me; it is an affair of natural antipathy. Come and go, then, about your chamber, walk up and down as much as you please, write, efface, tear up, burn; but do not touch the key in the lock, do not touch the handle of the door, for you would awake me with a start, and that would shake my nerves terribly."

"Decidedly, M. d'Artagnan," said Fouquet, "you are the wittiest and most courteous man I ever met, and you leave me but one regret, which is not to have made your acquaintance earlier."

D'Artagnan heaved a sigh as if to say:

"Alas! you might better have made it later!"

Thereupon he buried himself in his armchair, while Fouquet, half lying on his bed and leaning on one elbow, meditated upon his last adventure. Thus both of them, leaving the candles to burn themselves out, waited for the first gleams of dawn. When Fouquet sighed too deeply, D'Artagnan only snored the louder. No visitor, not even Aramis, came to break their quietude; not a sound was audible throughout that vast palace.

Outside the guards of honor and patrols of musketeers paced by, making the gravel creak beneath their tread; the sound only lulled the sleepers more profoundly. Added to this were the rustling of the wind and the plashing of the fountains still pursuing their eternal tasks without concern for the petty noises and petty agitations which make up the life and death of man.

THE VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

PART VI.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE MORNING.

As a contrast for the lamentable fate of the King shut up within the walls of the Bastille, and clutching despairingly at the bolts and bars, the rhetoric of the historians of old would not fail to present the antithesis of Philippe sleeping underneath the royal canopy. This does not mean that rhetoric is always at fault or always bestowing in the wrong place the flowers with which it would bedeck history. We shall, however, not attempt to complete the antithesis, but shall draw with interest the other picture intended to serve as a pendant for the preceding one.

The young prince descended from Aramis' abode in the same manner that the King had descended from the chamber of Morpheus. The dome sank gently under M. d'Herblay's weight, and Philippe found himself before the royal bed, which had ascended again after having deposited its prisoner in the depths of the underground vaults.

Alone in the presence of all this magnificence; alone before all this power; alone with the part which he had been forced to play, Philippe felt, for the first time, his soul open to receive the myriad emotions that are the vital throbbings of a royal heart. But he turned pale, despite himself, as he gazed upon the empty bed, still disarranged by his brother's body. This mute accomplice had returned after having served to complete the task. It brought back with it the traces of the crime. It spoke to the culprit in speech as brutal and frank as that which no criminal ever fears to employ toward his accomplice; it spoke the truth.

On looking more narrowly Philippe perceived the handkerchief still damp with the cold perspiration from Louis XIV.'s brow. The perspiration frightened him as much as the blood of Abel had frightened Cain.

"I am face to face with my fate," said Philippe, with fiery eye and livid face. "Will it be more ominous than my imprisonment was sad? Compelled to follow the dictates of thought, moment by moment, shall I always listen to the scruples of my heart? Forsooth, yes! the King slept here. His head it was that creased this pillow. His bitter tears stained this handkerchief — and I draw back and hesitate to lie upon this bed, or to grasp the handkerchief embroidered with the royal arms! Come, come! let us pattern after M. d'Herblay, who believes that action should ever be a pace ahead of thought; let us pattern after M. d'Herblay, who thinks always of himself, and who considers himself to be an honest man if he injures or betrays none but his enemies. This bed I alone would have occupied if Louis XIV. had not stood in my way, through my mother's fault. This handkerchief, wrought with the arms of France, would have been wholly mine if, as M. d'Herblay said, I had been left to my place in the royal cradle. Philippe, son of France, ascend again to your bed! Philippe, sole ruler of France, resume your rank! Philippe, sole heir presumptive of Louis XIII., your father, show no pity for the usurper who even now feels no remorse for all that you have suffered!"

Thus saying, Philippe, despite an instinctive repugnance and the shudders of terror that daunted his resolution, threw himself upon the royal bed and compelled his muscles to press the still warm place left by Louis XIV., while he swathed his forehead with the moist handkerchief. As he lay on his back, pressing into the downy pillow, Philippe perceived directly over him the crown of France held, as has been stated, on the golden pinions of an angel.

And so behold this royal interloper, with downcast eye and quaking frame. He resembles a tiger lost in a stormy night who, wandering through the reeds by an unknown ravine, has finally come to rest in the lair of an absent lion. The feline odor has attracted him, this humidity of his accustomed dwelling. He has found a bed of dry grass and bones crushed to a pasty consistency. He enters the cavern and stalks through the shadow with eye ablaze and penetrating. He

shakes his dripping flanks, and his body covered with mud, and settles down heavily, his great nose resting on his enormous paws, ready for sleep, but also ready for conflict. From time to time the lightning, which brightens up the crevices of the cave, the crash of contending branches, the rumble of falling stones, and the vague apprehension of peril awaken him from this lethargy brought on by fatigue.

One may be ambitious to sleep in a lion's bed, but one cannot hope to slumber peacefully there.

Philippe attended the slightest sound, his heart almost stifled by his varied emotions. But, relying upon his strength, increased by the impetus of his resolution, he awaited without weakening a decisive moment that would give him an opportunity to decide for himself. He hoped that some great danger would blaze the way for him, just as the phosphorescence of the tempest discloses to the sailors the height of the billows against which they are struggling. But nothing happened. Silence, the mortal enemy of troubled souls, the mortal enemy of ambitious men, shrouded in its dense shadow, all night long, the future King of France, underneath his stolen crown.

Towards morning a shadow rather than a body glided into the royal chamber. Philippe awaited the approach, but betrayed no surprise.

"Well, M. d'Herblay?" said he.

"Well, Sire, all is done."

"How?"

"Everything just as we planned!"

"Any resistance?"

"Desperate; weeping, outcries."

"And then?"

"Then stupor."

"But finally?"

"Finally complete victory and absolute silence."

"Did the governor of the Bastille suspect anything?"

"Nothing at all."

"But the resemblance?"

"The resemblance was the cause of the success."

"But pray bethink you that the prisoner will not fail to reveal his identity. I myself have been able to do that when I had to oppose a power much better established than my own is now."

"I have already provided for that. In a few days, perhaps sooner, if need be, we will take the captive out of his prison and send him into exile in a country so far away that —"

"Men come back from exile, M. d'Herblay."

"So far away, I repeat, that the strength of the man and the length of his days will not suffice for his return."

Once again the eye of the young King met that of Aramis with a gleam of cold intelligence.

"And M. du Vallon?" said Philippe, to change the conversation.

"He will be presented to you to-day, and — confidentially — will congratulate you upon escaping the danger which this usurper has made you undergo."

"What is to be done with him?"

"With M. du Vallon?"

"A dukedom — what think you?"

"Yes, a dukedom," replied Aramis, with a peculiar smile.

"Why do you laugh, M. d'Herblay?"

"I laugh at the unusual concern of your Majesty."

"Concern? What mean you by that?"

"Your Majesty is probably afraid lest the poor Porthos should become a troublesome witness, and you wish to make away with him."

"By making him a duke?"

"Certainly. You would kill him in this way. He would die of joy, and the secret with him."

"Ah! Heaven help us!"

"As for me," continued the phlegmatic Aramis, "I should lose a very good friend."

At this moment, in the midst of the idle conversation under which the two conspirators concealed their pride and joy at their success, Aramis heard something that caused him to prick up his ears.

"What is it?" said Philippe.

"Daybreak, Sire."

"What of it?"

"Why, before retiring last night, on this bed, you probably decided to do something this morning at daybreak, did you not?"

"I told my captain of the musketeers that I should await him," replied the young man, quickly.

"If you told him that, he will certainly be on hand, for he is a punctual man."

"I hear a step in the hall."

"It is he."

"Come, let us begin the assault," said the young King, resolutely.

"Be wary!" cried Aramis. "To begin the assault, and with D'Artagnan, would be madness itself. D'Artagnan knows nothing; D'Artagnan has seen nothing; D'Artagnan is a hundred leagues from suspecting your mystery. But so surely as he is the first to enter this room, he will scent something amiss that he must needs make it his business to fathom. Really, Sire, before you permit D'Artagnan to come in, you must bring in so many people that the keenest scent in this kingdom will be thrown off by twenty different trails."

"But how can I dismiss him, when I have made an appointment with him?" replied the prince, impatient to measure swords with his redoubtable adversary.

"I will see to that," replied the bishop, "and, to make a start, I am going to strike a blow that will stun our man."

"He is striking a blow just now, on his own account," interjaculaed the prince, hurriedly.

And indeed a knock resounded through the corridor. Aramis was not deceived. It was D'Artagnan who thus announced his presence.

We have seen how he passed the night in philosophizing with M. Fouquet. But the musketeer was thoroughly wearied even of feigning sleep; and as soon as the dawn came to illumine with its faint blue tinge the luxurious cornices of the superintendent's room, D'Artagnan arose from his armchair, adjusted his sword, and brushed his coat and hat with his sleeve, like a soldier of the guard who is preparing for inspection.

"Are you going?" asked M. Fouquet.

"Yes, monseigneur; and you?"

"I remain."

"On parole?"

"Of course."

"Good. I would not leave were it not to get that answer; you understand?"

"That sentence, you mean?"

"Hold. I have something of the Roman in my make-up. When I got up this morning I noticed that my sword had not taken hold of one of its aigulets, and that my baldrick had fallen down. That is a sure sign."

“Of good luck?”

“Yes, depend upon it; for every time that devil of a belt stuck to my back, it meant a punishment from M. de Tréville, or a refusal of money from M. de Mazarin. And every time the sword has stuck in the baldrick even, it stood for a bad commission, the like of which have come down to me in showers all my life long. Every time the sword has danced of its own accord in the scabbard, it foretold a fortunate duel. Whenever it stuck to my legs, it meant a slight wound. And when it fell, of a sudden, entirely out of the scabbard, I decided that I was in for it, to stay on the field of battle, to say nothing of two or three months with the surgeon and his bandages.”

“Indeed! I did not know that your sword kept you so well informed,” said Fouquet, with a pallid smile which betrayed the struggle against his own shortcomings. “Have you a *tisona* or *tranchante*? Is your blade bewitched or charmed?”

“My sword, look you, is almost a part of my own body. I have heard of certain men who are warned by a twitching in their limbs or a throbbing of their temples. But as for me, I am advised by my sword. However, it has said nothing this morning. Ah! forsooth! — see, it has just fallen of its own accord into the last hole of the belt. Do you know what that means?”

“No.”

“Well, it means an arrest this very day.”

“Ah! In that case,” said the superintendent, more astonished than vexed at this outspokenness, “if your sword tells you no sad news, is it not sad, at any rate, for you to arrest me?”

“Arrest you! Why you?”

“It must be so. The warning —”

“Does not concern you, since you were arrested yesterday. So I shall not arrest you; and that is why I am glad, and why I say that my day will be a fortunate one.”

And with these words, uttered with a grace of hearty affection, the captain took leave of M. Fouquet in order to return to the King.

He was on the point of crossing the threshold of the chamber when M. Fouquet said:

“One final proof of your esteem.”

“Name it, monseigneur.”

"M. d'Herblay ; let me see M. d'Herblay."

"I am going to try to bring him to you."

D'Artagnan would hardly have thought himself so good a prophet. It was written that the day would pass away and bring to him a realization of all the predictions that the morning had made.

So as we have seen, he came to knock at the King's door. It opened. The captain might have believed that the King himself came to open it. The supposition was not inadmissible after the agitated state in which the musketeer had left the King on the preceding evening. But instead of the royal figure which he was on the point of saluting respectfully, he perceived the long and imperturbable countenance of Aramis. He could hardly repress an exclamation, so great was his surprise.

"Aramis!" he said.

"How are you, my dear D'Artagnan?" replied the prelate, coldly.

"You here?" stammered the musketeer.

"His Majesty," replied the bishop, "prays you to announce that he is resting after having been very weary through the night."

"Ah!" observed D'Artagnan, who could not comprehend how the Bishop of Vannes, so slight a favorite on the preceding evening, had become on six hours' notice the tallest mushroom of fortune that had ever sprung up in a king's bed-room. Indeed, to carry to the threshold of the royal chamber the commands of the King, to serve as an intermediary to Louis XIV., to give orders in his name at two paces from him, one must be greater than ever was Richelieu with Louis XIII. The expressive eye of D'Artagnan, his parted lips, his curling mustache, said all this in the most eloquent of languages to the reigning favorite, who, however, remained imperturbable.

"Moreover," continued the bishop, "you will see to it, M. the Captain of the Musketeers, that no one is admitted this morning to the royal presence without special permission. His Majesty wishes to remain asleep."

"But," objected D'Artagnan, on the point of refusing to obey, and, above all, of giving vent to the suspicions aroused in him by the King's silence, "but, M. the Bishop, his Majesty has granted me a rendezvous for this morning."

"Later, later," came the voice of the King from the depths of the alcove, — a voice which sent a shiver through the mus-

keteer's veins. He bowed, overwhelmed, stupefied, stunned by the smile with which Aramis seemed to crush him so soon as the words were uttered.

"And then," continued the bishop, "as an answer to the matter about which you came to consult the King, my dear D'Artagnan, here is an order which you will please take note of immediately, for it concerns M. Fouquet."

D'Artagnan took the order that was held out to him.

"To be set at liberty?" he murmured. "Ah!"

And he uttered a second "Ah!" more intelligent than the first, since this order explained Aramis' presence with the King. Aramis, in order to obtain pardon for M. Fouquet, must have made considerable progress in the royal favor; and this favor, in turn, would explain the almost incredible assurance with which M. d'Herblay gave out orders in the name of his Majesty the King. For D'Artagnan it sufficed to have understood something in order to understand everything. He bowed and turned away two paces.

"I will accompany you," said the bishop.

"Where to?"

"To M. Fouquet's. I desire to take part in his joy."

"Ah! Aramis, how you upset me, just now," remarked D'Artagnan.

"But you understand now?"

"Odds! why not?"

Then, in an aside, almost hissing between his teeth:

"No — no, I do not understand. But it is all the same; here is the King's order." And he added, "This way, mon-seigneur," as he conducted Aramis to the room of Fouquet.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE KING'S FRIEND.

FOUQUET was awaiting them anxiously. He had already excused himself to several of his servants and friends who, forestalling his customary hour, had presented themselves at his door. Of each of them — concealing the danger which hung over his head — he inquired only as to where Aramis might be found.

So soon as he beheld D'Artagnan returning, followed by the Bishop of Vannes, his joy scarcely knew bounds; it rivalled all his previous anxiety. The sight of Aramis was to the superintendent a compensation for all the griefs he had undergone because of his arrest. The prelate was silent and grave. D'Artagnan was nonplussed by this accumulation of incredible happenings.

"Well, captain, so you really have brought M. d'Herblay?"

"And something better still, monseigneur."

"What is it?"

"Your liberty."

"I am free?"

"You are. An order of the King."

Fouquet resumed his habitual serenity in order to question Aramis by a look.

"Oh, yes; you can thank M. the Bishop of Vannes," pursued D'Artagnan, "for he it was who brought about the King's revocation."

"Oh!" said M. Fouquet, more humiliated by the service than grateful for its success.

"But you," continued D'Artagnan, turning to Aramis, "you who protect M. Fouquet, cannot you do something for me?"

"Anything you like, my friend," replied the bishop, calmly.

"Only one thing, then, and I shall call myself satisfied. How is it that you have become the King's favorite — you who have not spoken to him more than twice in your life?"

"From a friend like yourself," rejoined Aramis, subtilely, "one can conceal nothing."

"Good! Proceed."

"Well, then, you believe that I have seen the King but twice, when in reality I have seen him more than a hundred times. Only we have hidden the fact — that's all."

And without trying to extinguish the renewed glow of color brought to D'Artagnan's forehead by this new revelation, Aramis turned toward M. Fouquet, who was no less surprised than the musketeer.

"Monseigneur," he continued, "the King has charged me to say to you that he is more than ever your friend, and that your handsome entertainment, so generously offered, has touched his heart."

Upon which he bowed to M. Fouquet so reverently that the latter, incapable of understanding anything in a diplomacy so

vigorous as this, stood speechless, without motion or idea. D'Artagnan thought that the two men had something to say to each other, and was on the point of obeying that instinctive politeness which in such case precipitates a man towards the door when he feels his company irksome to the others; but his eager curiosity, spurred on by so many mysteries, counselled him to remain.

Aramis turned towards him and said quietly:

"You will not forget, my friend, the King's order respecting those who are to be received at his rising?"

The words were clear enough; the musketeer understood them. He bowed to M. Fouquet, then to Aramis, with a tinge of ironical respect, and disappeared.

M. Fouquet, whose impatience could hardly await this moment, darted towards the door to close it, and returning to the bishop, said:

"My dear D'Herblay, I think it is about time for you to tell me fully about what has occurred. To tell the truth, I understand nothing of this."

"We are going to explain things," replied Aramis, seating himself and motioning M. Fouquet to a chair. "Where shall we begin?"

"At the beginning. The question of first importance is, why does the King set me at liberty?"

"You should rather have asked me why he caused you to be arrested."

"Since my arrest I have had time to think over matters and I have come to the opinion that it was caused by a slight feeling of jealousy. My fête annoyed M. Colbert, and M. Colbert has hatched up some plot against me — Belle-Isle, for example?"

"No, Belle-Isle has nothing to do with it now."

"What is it, then?"

"Do you remember those receipts for thirteen millions that M. de Mazarin got away from you?"

"Oh, yes! Well?"

"Well, you are now proclaimed to be the thief."

"Good Heavens!"

"That is not all. Do you recall that letter written by you to La Vallière?"

"Alas! It is true!"

"Well, that bespeaks you as a traitor and a suborner."

"Then why am I pardoned?"

"We have not yet come to that part of the argument. I want to see you grasp fully the fact itself. Remark this well: the King knows you to be guilty of misappropriating public funds. Forsooth, I myself know that you are not guilty; but the King has not seen the receipts, so he cannot do otherwise than think you criminal."

"Pardon me; I do not see —"

"You shall see. The King, furthermore, having read your love-letter to La Vallière, and your proposals to her, cannot remain in doubt respecting your intentions towards that lady. Am I not right?"

"Certainly. But conclude."

"I am nearly done. The King, therefore, is for you a powerful, implacable, and lasting enemy."

"Agreed. But am I, then, so powerful that he does not dare destroy me, despite his hatred, with all the means that my weakness and my misfortune have given him over me?"

"It is well established, then," replied Aramis, coldly, "that the King is irreconcilably at outs with you."

"But since he pardons me —"

"Do you believe that?" said the bishop, with a scrutinizing glance.

"Without trusting his sincerity of heart, I believe the reality of the deed."

Aramis shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Why, then, did Louis XIV. commission you to tell me all that you have just related?" demanded Fouquet.

"The King has commissioned me with nothing for you."

"Nothing!" exclaimed the astounded superintendent. "But this order."

"Ah! yes, certainly there is an order."

The words were uttered by Aramis in so strange a tone that Fouquet involuntarily shuddered.

"Hold!" said he, "you are concealing something from me, I see."

Aramis stroked his chin with his white fingers, but said nothing.

"Does the King exile me?"

"Don't make as though you were playing that childish game, where the presence of the thing hidden is disclosed by the sound of a bell, when near to it or far away."

"Speak, then!"

"Guess."

"You frighten me."

"Bah! Then you have not guessed."

"What has the King told you? In the name of our friendship, do not deceive me."

"The King has told me nothing."

"You will make me die of impatience, D'Herblay. Am I still to be superintendent?"

"As long as you like."

"But what singular sway have you assumed all at once over his Majesty?"

"Ah! that's the question!"

"Do you make him act as you desire?"

"I believe so."

"It is incredible."

"So any one would say."

"D'Herblay, in the name of our alliance, our friendship, and everything you hold dear in this world, speak, I beseech you! By what means have you succeeded thus in reaching Louis XIV.? He did not favor you, I am certain of that."

"The King will favor me *now*," said Aramis, laying emphasis upon the last word.

"You have some special bond with him, then?"

"Yes."

"A secret, perhaps?"

"Yes, a secret."

"A secret of the sort to change his Majesty's interests?"

"You are really a man of superior intelligence, monseigneur. You have guessed it. I have, in fact, unearthed a secret of a sort to change the interests of the King of France."

"Ah!" said Fouquet, with the reserve of a well-bred man who does not wish to question.

"And you shall be the judge," pursued Aramis; "you shall tell me if I deceive myself concerning the importance of this secret."

"I listen, since you are good enough to unbosom to me. Only pray take note, my friend, that I have invited no confidence that it would be indiscreet for you to make."

Aramis grew reserved for a moment.

"Do not speak," cried Fouquet. "There is still time."

"Do you remember," said the bishop, with downcast eyes, "the birth of Louis XIV.?"

"As though it were to-day."

"Have you ever heard anything particular about this birth?"

"Nothing, except that the King was not really the son of Louis XIII."

"That makes no difference to us nor yet to the kingdom. He is the son of his father, says the French law, whose father is recognized by the law."

"That is true; but it is a matter of some importance, where the quality of races is concerned."

"A secondary question. So you know nothing particular?"

"Nothing."

"This is where my secret begins."

"Ah!"

"The queen instead of being delivered of one son was delivered of two."

Fouquet raised his head.

"And the second is dead?" he asked.

"You shall see. These twin children seemed in a fair way to become the pride of their mother and the hope of France. But the weakness of the King and his superstition made him fearful of conflict between the two children, whose rights were equal. He suppressed one of the twins."

"Suppressed, say you?"

"Give heed. The two children grew to manhood. One is on the throne and you are his minister; the other dwells in shadow and seclusion."

"And the latter?"

"Is my friend."

"Good Heavens! What are you telling me, M. d'Herblay? And what is this poor prince doing?"

"Ask me rather what he has done."

"Yes, yes."

"He has been brought up in the country, then sequestered in a fortress known as the Bastille."

"Is it possible!" exclaimed the superintendent, clasping his hands.

"The one is the most fortunate of mortals; the other the most unfortunate of the downtrodden."

"Does his mother not know this?"

"Anne of Austria knows all."

"And the King?"

"Ah! the King knows nothing."

"So much the better!" said Fouquet.

This exclamation seemed to produce a quick impression upon Aramis. He looked at his interlocutor with an air of anxiety.

"Pray pardon me! I have interrupted you," said Fouquet.

"I was saying," resumed Aramis, "that this poor prince was the most wretched of men till God, who cares for all his creatures, undertook to come to his relief."

"Ah! in what way?"

"You shall see. The reigning King — I say, the reigning King — you can easily guess why."

"No, why?"

"Because both were legitimate heirs to the throne and should have been kings. Is not that your opinion?"

"It is."

"Positively?"

"Positively. Twins are one being in two bodies."

"I am delighted that a counsellor of your discernment and authority should give me this opinion. Then it is agreed between us that they possessed the same rights, is it not?"

"It is. But, good Heavens! what a situation!"

"You are not to the end yet. Patience."

"Oh! I shall find it."

"God wished to raise up for the oppressed an avenger, or a supporter, if you prefer. It happened that the reigning King, the usurper, — you believe with me, do you not, that it is usurpation when one remains in tranquil enjoyment and selfish possession of an inheritance, who, at most, has the right to only half?"

"Usurpation is the word."

"I continue, then. God so willed that the usurper should have for prime minister a man of talent, large of heart, great of mind, above all else."

"Good, good!" cried Fouquet. "I understand; you have counted on me to aid you to repair the wrong done to the poor brother of Louis XIV. You have reckoned wisely. I will aid you. Thank you, D'Herblay, thank you."

"That is not all yet. You will not let me finish," said the impassible Aramis.

"I am silent."

"M. Fouquet, as I was saying, being the minister of the reigning King, became an object of aversion to the King, and was strongly menaced with the loss of fortune, liberty, and

life, perhaps, by the intrigue and the hatred too readily heeded of the King. But God so wills — still in the interest of the sacrificed prince — that M. Fouquet shall have, in his turn, a devoted friend who knows the secret of state and who feels enough resolution to divulge it after having had strength enough to carry the secret for twenty years buried in his heart."

"You need not go further," said Fouquet, bubbling over with generous ideas; "I understand you and can guess everything. You went to see the King when the news of my arrest reached you. You supplicated for me, and he refused to listen. Then you menaced him with the secret and its revelation, and Louis XIV., astounded, has granted to the fear of your indiscretion what he denied to your generous intercession. I understand, I understand! You hold the King! I understand!"

"You understand nothing at all," replied Aramis, "and you have interrupted me again, my friend. Moreover, allow me to tell you that you are forsaking your logic, and are not utilizing your memory enough."

"In what way?"

"Do you know upon what I laid most emphasis at the beginning of our conversation?"

"Yes; his Majesty's hatred for me — an unconquerable hatred. But what animosity would resist such menace as this revelation carries with it?"

"This revelation, forsooth? That is where your logic is lacking. What! Do you pretend to say that if I had made such a revelation to the King I should be alive now to tell you about it?"

"It was not ten minutes ago that you left the King."

"That may be. He might not have had time to kill me; but he would have had time to gag me and throw me into a dungeon. Come, man, use a little more method in your reasoning, *mordieu!*"

And by the use of this musketeer oath, let slip by a man who never forgot himself, Fouquet was made to comprehend to what degree of exaltation the calm, impenetrable Bishop of Vannes had arrived. He shuddered.

"And then," resumed Aramis, curbing his feelings, "would I be the man that I am, would I be a true friend if I exposed you — you whom the King hates already — to a sentiment

more than ever to be dreaded on the part of the young King? To have stolen is nothing; to have courted his mistress is little; but to hold in your hands his crown and his honor—why, he would rather tear out your heart with his own hands!”

“You have given him no inkling of the secret, then?”

“I would sooner have swallowed all the poisons that Mithridates took for twenty years, in trying to ward off death.”

“What, then, have you done?”

“Ah! that’s the point, monseigneur! I think I have aroused some interest in you. You will listen closely, will you not?”

“Will I listen? Proceed!”

Aramis made a tour of the room to assure himself of its security and silence, and then came back to his former place beside the armchair wherein sat Fouquet awaiting his revelations with a profound anxiety.

“I forgot to tell you,” resumed Aramis to Fouquet, who listened with the minutest attention, “a remarkable fact about the royal twins: it is that God has made them so much alike that he alone, if he should cite them before his judgment seat, would be able to tell them apart. Their own mother cannot.”

“Is it possible?” cried Fouquet.

“The same noble cast of countenance, the same bearing, the same stature, the same voice.”

“But their thoughts; their intelligence; their knowledge of life?”

“Oh! there is the difference, monseigneur. Yes, for the prisoner of the Bastille is undeniably the superior of his brother; and if this poor victim should, by any chance, pass from his prison to the throne, France would not have had, since her founding, perhaps, a lord and master more puissant by reason of his genius and nobility of character.”

Fouquet allowed his forehead to rest in his hands a moment, as though overcome by the tremendous secret. Aramis came closer.

“There is still another difference,” said he, continuing his work of temptation; “a difference that concerns you, monseigneur, between the twin sons of Louis XIII. It is that the last comer does not know M. Colbert.”

Fouquet raised his head presently, his features pale and drawn. The blow had struck home — not his heart, but his wit.

“I understand you,” said he; “you propose a conspiracy.”

“To some extent.”

“One of those attempts which, as you said when we began our conversation, change the fate of empires.”

“And of superintendents; yes, monseigneur.”

“In a word, you propose to me to aid in the exchange of the son of Louis XIII. who is a prisoner to-day, for the son of Louis XIII. who at this moment is asleep in the chamber of Morpheus?”

Aramis smiled with the sinister expression of his sinister thought.

“Possibly,” said he.

“Nevertheless,” continued Fouquet, after an awkward silence, “you have not reflected that this political task is of a nature to upset the whole kingdom; and that to pull up by its deep-set roots this tree that is called a king, and to replace it by another would leave the soil in such a state of unstableness that the new king would never stand strong against the wind which remained from the last tempest, nor against the totterings of his own body.”

Aramis continued to smile.

“And have you thought,” continued M. Fouquet, warming up with that strength of mind which in a few moments plots out and matures a project, and with that breadth of view which foresees every consequence and embraces every result; “have you thought that we must call together the nobles, the clergy, and the third estate; that it will be necessary to depose the reigning prince, trouble the tomb of Louis XIII. with a frightful scandal, imperil the life and honor of a woman, Anne of Austria, the life and safety of another woman, Maria Teresa, and that when all is done, if we finish — ”

“I do not follow you,” said Aramis, icily. “There is not a word to the point in all that you have said.”

“What?” ejaculated the superintendent, in surprise; “a man of your calibre declining to discuss the consequences? Are you going to confine yourself to the childish joys of a political illusion, and yet neglect the means of its fulfilment — that is, reality? Is it possible?”

“Friend,” said Aramis, dwelling on the word with a sort of

disdainful familiarity, "what plan does God take to substitute one king for another?"

"God!" exclaimed Fouquet; "God gives a command to his agent, who seizes the doomed one, bears him away and seats the triumphant one on the vacated throne. But you forget that this agent is called Death. By all that is holy, M. d'Herblay, have you any such idea —"

"That is not the purpose, monseigneur. In truth, you go beyond the mark. Who, indeed, has spoken of compassing the death of Louis XIV.? Who has spoken of following the example of God in the strict practice of his works? No, that is not it. I wished to show you that God accomplishes his ends without turmoil, without scandal, without effort, and that men who are inspired by him succeed like him in all that they undertake, in all that they attempt, in all that they do."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, my friend," replied Aramis, with the same intonation that he had given to the word "friend" the first time he pronounced it, "I mean that if there is to be turmoil, scandal, or even effort in the substitution of the prisoner for the King I defy you to prove it."

"What are you saying?" cried Fouquet, whiter than the handkerchief with which he wiped his temples; "you mean —"

"Come to the King's chamber," continued Aramis, impassibly, "and I defy you, who are in the mystery, to discern that it is the prisoner of the Bastille who is in his brother's bed."

"But the King?" stammered Fouquet, seized with horror at the piece of news.

"Which King?" said Aramis, in his sweetest accents, "the one who hates you, or the one who loves you?"

"The King — of yesterday?"

"The King of yesterday? Calm yourself. He has been taken to the Bastille, the place that his victim occupied for so long a time."

"Just Heaven! And who took him there?"

"I."

"You?"

"Yes, and by the simplest way. I took him during the night, and while he sank into the shadow, the other rose into the light. I do not believe that it made the slightest noise. A lightning flash without thunder never awakens any one."

Fouquet gave vent to a dull cry as though he had been struck a blow from some unseen force, and seized his head between his nerveless hands.

"You did that?" he murmured.

"Easily enough, what do you think?"

"You have dethroned the King? You have imprisoned him?"

"It is done."

"And the deed was accomplished here at Vaux?"

"Here at Vaux in the chamber of Morpheus. Would it not almost seem to have been built in anticipation of such a deed?"

"And when did all this happen?"

"Last night."

"Last night?"

"Between midnight and one o'clock."

Fouquet made a movement as if to throw himself upon Aramis, but restrained himself.

"At Vaux! In my own house!" said he in a choking voice.

"Yes, I believe so. It is undoubtedly your house, since M. Colbert cannot steal it from you."

"Then it was in my house that this crime was committed."

"This crime?" said Aramis, stupefied.

"This abominable crime!" continued Fouquet, becoming more and more wrought up. "This crime more execrable than an assassination! This crime that dishonors my name forever, and brings down on my head the horror of posterity!"

"There, there! You forget yourself, monsieur!" interposed Aramis, in an uncertain tone; "you speak too loudly. Be careful!"

"I will cry so loudly that the universe shall hear me."

"M. Fouquet, be careful!"

Fouquet turned towards the prelate and looked him in the eye.

"Yes," said he, "you have dishonored me in committing this treason, this covert act upon my guest, on one who rested peacefully under my roof. Oh! woe is me!"

"Woe to the man, rather, who planned, under your roof, the loss of your fortune, of your life! Do you forget that?"

"He was my guest! He was my King!"

Aramis stood upright, his eyes blood-shot, his mouth twitching convulsively.

"Have I to deal with an insensate man?" he said.

"You have to deal with an honest man."

"Fool!"

"With a man who will prevent you from consummating your crime."

"Fool!"

"With a man who would rather die, who would rather kill you, than allow you to bring about his dishonor."

And Fouquet seized his sword, replaced by D'Artagnan at the head of his bed, and gripped the quivering blade resolutely in his hands. Aramis knitted his brows and thrust his hand into his breast as if in search of a weapon. The motion did not escape Fouquet. Noble and superb in his magnanimity, he threw his sword away and while it rolled into the centre of the bed, he approached Aramis in such fashion as to touch his shoulder with his disarmed hand.

"Monsieur," said he, "it would be sweeter far to die on this spot than to survive my disgrace. If you have any remnant of friendship left for me, I beseech you give me my death-blow."

Aramis remained silent and motionless.

"You will not reply?"

Aramis lifted his head gently, and a gleam of hope might be seen shining forth again from his eyes.

"Reflect, monseigneur," said he, "upon all that awaits us. Simple justice is being done; the King still lives, and his imprisonment is the means of saving your life."

"Yes," replied Fouquet, "you may have been acting in my behalf, but I cannot accept your service. Nevertheless, I do not wish to do you hurt. You may leave this house."

Aramis stifled the cry that sought to come from his bursting heart.

"I extend the rights of hospitality to all," continued Fouquet, with an air of inexpressible majesty; "you shall not be sacrificed to fate any more than that one whose downfall you have wrought."

"But you yourself shall be," said Aramis in a hoarse, prophetic voice; "you shall be, you shall be!"

"I accept the augury, M. d'Herblay; but nothing shall stop me. You must leave Vaux, you must leave France. I give you just four hours to place yourself beyond reach of the King."

"Four hours!" retorted Aramis, mocking and incredulous.

"Upon the honor of a Fouquet! No one shall follow you before that. You would then have four hours the start of all whom the King might send in pursuit of you."

"Four hours!" repeated Aramis, coloring up.

"That is more than you will need to take ship and reach Belle-Isle, which I give you for a place of refuge."

"Ah!" murmured Aramis.

"Belle-Isle is my haven for you, as Vaux is my haven for the King. Go, D'Herblay, go. While I live there shall not fall a hair of your head."

"Thank you!" said Aramis, in a tone of chilly irony.

"Go, then, and give me your hand before we hasten apart — you to save your life, I to save my honor."

Aramis drew from his breast the hand he had there concealed. It was red with his blood. He had dug his nails into his breast as if to punish the flesh for having nursed so many wild projects, as insensate and perishable as the life of man. Fouquet was seized with horror and pity. He opened his arms to Aramis.

"I am unarmed," murmured the latter, as fierce and terrible as the shade of Dido.

Then, without touching the outstretched hand of Fouquet, he turned aside and made a couple of steps backward. His last word was an imprecation. His last gesture was a curse which his blood-stained hand bestowed, as it sprinkled a few gory drops full in Fouquet's face; and both of them sprang out of the room by way of the secret staircase leading to the inner court-yard. Fouquet ordered his best horses, and Aramis paused at the foot of the staircase that led to Porthos' room. For a long time he meditated, while Fouquet's carriage left the paved court-yard at full gallop.

"Shall I go alone," said Aramis to himself, "or stop to warn the prince? Oh, fury! Warn the prince — then what? Flee with him? Take with me everywhere this accusing witness? Would not war follow? civil war, so implacable, and alas! without resource? Impossible! But what will he do without me? Oh, without me he will go to pieces as I would! Who knows? Let fate rule! He was condemned, let him remain so. God! Demon! Ominous and mocking power called by some the Genius of mankind, thou blowest more uselessly and uncertainly than the mountain breeze. Thou callest thyself Chance, and thou art nothing. Thou encirclest the universe

with thy spell, thou movest the rocky fastnesses, the mountain itself, and suddenly thou thyself art broken before the cross of dead wood, behind which shines another Power invisible — whom thou deniest, perhaps, but who visits vengeance upon thee, crushing thee to earth unrecognizingly! Lost! I have lost! What shall I do? Go to Belle-Isle? Yes. And Porthos will remain here and talk and tell everybody! Porthos, perhaps, will be the one to suffer. No! I cannot have Porthos come to grief. He is a part of me; his grief is mine. Porthos shall flee with me and share my lot. It must be so."

And Aramis, alarmed lest he might meet some one to whom this haste would seem suspicious, ascended the stairway without attracting attention. Porthos had but just come back from Paris and slept already the sleep of the just. His enormous frame forgot its fatigue, while his spirit forgot its thoughts. Aramis entered noiselessly as a shadow, and laid his nervous hand upon the giant's shoulder.

"Away!" cried he, "away, Porthos, away!"

Porthos obeyed, rose up, and opened his eyes even before his mind had opened.

"We must go," said Aramis.

"Ah!"

"We must take horse more swift than ever before."

"Ah!" repeated Porthos.

"Dress yourself, my friend."

And he helped the giant to put on his clothes, and stuffed his money and diamonds into his pockets. While thus engaged, a slight noise drew his attention. D'Artagnan was looking at them through a crack in the door. Aramis trembled.

"What the devil is making you so worried?" said the musketeer.

"Nonsense!" grumbled Porthos.

"We leave on a mission," added the bishop.

"You are very lucky!" said the musketeer.

"Pooh!" said Porthos, "I am tired out; but the King's business —"

"Have you seen M. Fouquet?" said Aramis to D'Artagnan.

"Yes, this moment, in his carriage."

"And what did he say to you?"

"Good-bye."

"Was that all?"

"What else would you have him say? What do I count for since you are all in the King's favor?"

"Listen," said Aramis, embracing the musketeer, "your good time is coming back again. You will no longer need to be jealous of anybody."

"Ah, bah!"

"I prophesy that this very day some happening will raise your rank."

"Indeed!"

"You know that I know something."

"Oh, yes!"

"Come, Porthos, are you ready? Let us away!"

"Away!"

"First let us both embrace D'Artagnan."

"*Pardieu!*"

"How about the horses?"

"Oh, there are plenty here. Want mine?"

"No, Porthos has his own mount. Adieu! Adieu!"

The two fugitives mounted their horses under the very eyes of the captain of musketeers, who held Porthos' stirrup for him and followed his friends with his eyes until they had disappeared in the distance.

"On any other occasion than this," mused the Gascon, "I would have said that these two fellows were making their escape. But to-day politics have changed so much that it is called going on a mission. Well, I have nothing to say, save good wishes. My own affairs need looking after."

And he philosophically entered his lodgings.

CHAPTER XLIX.

HOW THE COUNTERSIGN WAS RESPECTED AT THE BASTILLE.

FOUQUET fairly burned the pavement as he sped forth. On his way he trembled with horror when he thought of the plot he had just learned.

"What must have been the younger days," he thought, "of those astounding men who even to-day, in their declining years, know how to hatch up such plots and to carry them out without a tremor!"

Again, he would ask himself whether all that Aramis had told him were not a dream and whether the fable itself were not a trap — in which case he, Fouquet, on arriving at the Bastille, would find an order for his arrest that would send him to join the deposed King. With this idea in mind, he left sealed orders along the road, while his horses were being changed. These orders were addressed to M. d'Artagnan and to all the captains whose fidelity could be relied upon.

"In this way," said Fouquet to himself, "whether prisoner or not, I shall render the service I owe to the cause of honor. The orders will not arrive until after I return free, and so they will not be unsealed. I can take them back. If I am detained it will be because some misfortune has befallen me. In that case I would be sending aid to myself as well as to the King."

Thus prepared, he arrived at the Bastille. He had made five and a half leagues an hour.

All the delays that Aramis had escaped in the Bastille happened to M. Fouquet. In vain did he send in his name; in vain did he try to obtain recognition — he could not obtain admission. By means of entreaties, threats, and commands, he prevailed upon a sentinel to report him to a petty officer who advised the major. As for the governor, they did not even dare to trouble him. Fouquet sat in his carriage at the door of the fortress fretting inwardly and awaiting the return of the subaltern, who reappeared at last with a rather sullen air.

"Well," said Fouquet, impatiently, "what said the major?"

"Well, my good sir," replied the soldier, "M. the Major laughed in my face. He said that M. Fouquet is at Vaux, and that, even if he were at Paris, M. Fouquet would not rise at so early an hour."

"*Mordieux!* You are a pack of idiots!" cried the minister, jumping out of the carriage.

And before the officer had time to close the gate, Fouquet sprang through it and hastened in, despite the shouts of the soldier, who called for assistance. Fouquet gained ground, paying little heed to the man's cries, but the latter finally caught up with him and repeated the alarm at the inner gate:

"Look out, look out, sentinel!"

The sentinel presented his pike at the minister; but the latter, robust and agile and carried away by anger, seized it

out of the soldier's hands and belabored him soundly with it over the shoulders. The petty officer came too close, and he, also, got his share. Both uttered cries of rage, at sound of which the whole first body of the guard came running up. Among them was one who recognized the superintendent, and exclaimed :

" Monseigneur ! Ah ! monseigneur ! Hold, there, you fellows ! "

And he put an effective stop to the guards who were preparing to avenge their comrades. Fouquet commanded them to open the gate ; but they required the countersign from him. Then he ordered them to send for the governor. The latter, however, had already learned of the disturbance at the gate. At the head of a picket of twenty men he ran forward, followed by the major, in the belief that an attack had been planned against the Bastille. Baisemeaux also recognized Fouquet, and dropped his sword which he had just been brandishing.

" Ah ! monseigneur," he stammered, " how can I excuse — "

" Monsieur," said the superintendent, red with rage and covered with perspiration, " I congratulate you ; your guard is admirably maintained."

Baisemeaux grew pale, believing that the words were uttered ironically and foretold a furious bit of anger. But Fouquet, having caught his breath, beckoned the sentinel and the subaltern who were rubbing their shoulders.

" There are twenty pistoles for the sentinel," said he, " and fifty for the officer. I present my compliments, gentlemen, and shall speak to the King. M. de Baisemeaux, a word with you."

And while a general murmur of satisfaction arose, he followed the governor to the administration building. Baisemeaux already trembled with shame and uneasiness. Aramis' early morning visit now seemed to him to be fraught with results which an official might with good reason find extraordinary. But it was quite another thing when Fouquet turned on him and said in a quick voice and with an imperious demeanor :

" Monsieur, you have seen M. d'Herblay this morning ? "

" Yes, monseigneur."

" Well, monsieur, have you not felt the horror of the crime of which you have become the accomplice ? "

"Come, not so bad after all!" thought Baisemeaux. Then he added aloud: "What crime, monseigneur?"

"That for which you could be drawn and quartered, monsieur; pray remember that! But this is not the time to be angry. Conduct me immediately to the prisoner."

"To what prisoner?" said Baisemeaux, trembling.

"You pretend to be ignorant! But that is the best thing for you to do. In good sooth, if you were to confess a part in the crime, it would be the end of you. So I prefer to believe in your ignorance."

"I beseech you, monseigneur —"

"Very good. Lead me to the prisoner."

"To Marchiali?"

"Who is Marchiali?"

"The prisoner brought in this morning by M. d'Herblay."

"Was he called Marchiali?" observed the superintendent, troubled in mind by the ingenuous assurance of Baisemeaux.

"Yes, monseigneur, that is the name that was set down for him here."

Fouquet looked, as it were, to the very bottom of Baisemeaux's heart. He read there, with that certainty given to men in authority, an absolute sincerity. Besides, after scrutinizing that face, how could he believe that Aramis had chosen such a confidant?

"Is he the prisoner that M. d'Herblay took away day before yesterday?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"And that he brought back this morning?" quickly added Fouquet, who grasped forthwith the details of Aramis' plot.

"The same. Yes, monseigneur."

"And he is called Marchiali?"

"Marchiali. If monseigneur has come to remove him, so much the better. I was on the point of writing about him."

"What, then, has he done?"

"Since morning he has annoyed me exceedingly. He has such tremendous fits of passion that one would believe he was about to tear down the Bastille."

"I am come to relieve you of him, as it happens," said Fouquet.

"Ah, so much the better!"

"Conduct me to his dungeon."

"Monseigneur will please to give me an order —"

"What order?"

"An order from the King."

"Wait till I sign one."

"That will not be sufficient, monseigneur, I must have an order from the King."

Fouquet assumed an air of irritation.

"Since you are so exacting," said he, "about handing over the prisoners, show me the order which released this particular one before."

Baisemeaux displayed the order to release Seldon.

"Well," observed Fouquet, "Seldon is not Marchiali."

"But Marchiali is not at liberty; he is still here."

"Did you not say that M. d'Herblay had taken him away and brought him back again?"

"No, I did not say that."

"You said it so plainly that I still seem to hear it."

"A slip of the tongue, then."

"M. de Baisemeaux, take care!"

"I have nothing to fear, monseigneur, I am following rules."

"Dare you say so?"

"I would say it before an apostle. M. d'Herblay brought me an order to release Seldon, and Seldon is free."

"I tell you that Marchiali is gone from the Bastille."

"That must be proved, monseigneur."

"Let me see him."

"Monseigneur, you who govern this realm know very well that no one can see the prisoners without an express order from the King."

"But M. d'Herblay got in."

"That must be proved, monseigneur."

"M. de Baisemeaux, once more I say, pay attention to your words."

"The proofs are there."

"M. d'Herblay is overthrown."

"Overthrown? M. d'Herblay? Impossible!"

"You see that he has influenced you."

"That which influences me, monseigneur, is the service of the King. I am doing my duty. Give me an order from him and you shall be admitted."

"Hold, M. the Governor! I give you my word that if you will allow me to reach the prisoner, I will give you an order from the King immediately."

"Give it to me now, monseigneur."

"And that if you refuse, I shall have you arrested at once, with all your officers."

"Before you commit this violent deed, monseigneur," said Baisemeaux, growing very pale, "you will please to consider that we obey only the orders of the King, and that it will be just as easy for you to obtain one to see Marchiali as to obtain one to do me so much injury, me who am innocent."

"True!" cried Fouquet, in a rage; "true! Well, M. Baisemeaux," he added in resonant tones, drawing the unhappy man towards him, "do you know why I am so keenly desirous of speaking to the prisoner?"

"No, monseigneur; and deign to notice how you are terrifying me. I tremble and feel as though I would fall into a faint."

"You will be more likely to fall into a faint soon, when I come back with ten thousand men and thirty pieces of cannon."

"Good Heavens, monseigneur! You are out of your head."

"When I have aroused against you and yours all the people in Paris, and have battered down the gates, and have swung you to the corner bars!"

"Monseigneur! monseigneur! for pity's sake!"

"I will give you just ten minutes to decide," added Fouquet, calmly. "I will sit down here and wait. If at the end of ten minutes you persist in your refusal, I will leave, and you may think me demented or not, just as you please; but you shall see!"

Baisemeaux stamped the ground like a man in despair, but he answered not a word. Seeing this, Fouquet seized a pen and ink and wrote:

"Order for M. le Prévot des Marchands to call together the municipal guard and to march upon the Bastille for the service of the King."

Baisemeaux shrugged his shoulders. Fouquet continued to write:

"Order for M. le Duc de Bouillon and M. le Prince de Condé to take command of the Swiss and of the Guards, and march upon the Bastille, for the service of the King."

Baisemeaux reflected. Fouquet continued:

“Order for all the soldiery, municipal or noble, to seize and hold, wherever they may be found, the Chevalier d’Herblay, Bishop of Vannes, and his accomplices, to wit : first, M. de Baisemeaux, Governor of the Bastille, under suspicion of the crime of high treason, rebellion, and —”

“Stop, monseigneur,” cried Baisemeaux. “I understand absolutely nothing of this ; but so many evils, as though set on foot by madness itself, might happen here in a couple of hours, that the King, who shall judge me, shall see if I have done wrong in waiving his orders in the presence of so many imminent catastrophes. Come with me to the dungeon, monseigneur ; you shall see Marchiali.”

Fouquet darted out of the room, and Baisemeaux followed him, wiping away the cold sweat that trickled down his forehead.

“What a frightful morning !” said he, “what a disgrace !”

“Faster !” responded Fouquet.

Baisemeaux motioned to the jailer to precede them. He was afraid of his companion. The latter saw it.

“A truce to this childishness !” said the superintendent, brusquely. “Leave the man alone. Take the keys yourself and show me the way. No one, you understand, must be witness of what is to take place here.”

“Ah !” said Baisemeaux, irresolutely.

“Again !” cried Fouquet. “Ah ! say no, at once, and I will leave the Bastille to carry my own dispatches.”

Baisemeaux bent his head submissively, took the keys, and climbed alone with the minister up the stairway of the tower. As they proceeded up the spiral staircase certain stifled murmurs gradually became distinct cries and frightful imprecations.

“What is that ?” asked Fouquet.

“That is your Marchiali,” answered the governor. “Just observe how these madmen howl !”

He accompanied the answer with a glance more filled with uncomfortable allusions than politeness for Fouquet. The latter shuddered. He had just recognized in a cry more terrible than the rest the voice of the King. He stopped on a landing, and tried to seize the bunch of keys from Baisemeaux. The terrified governor believed that this last-turned maniac was on the point of dashing out his brains with one of the keys.

"Ah!" cried he, "M. d'Herblay never told me that!"

"Quick, then, the keys!" said Fouquet, snatching them from him, "which door is it that I want to open?"

"That one."

A hideous cry, followed by a terrible blow on the door, made the echoes ring in the stairway.

"Leave me!" said Fouquet to Baisemeaux, threateningly.

"I ask nothing better," murmured Baisemeaux. "Here are a couple of lunatics coming face to face. One of them will eat the other, I am certain."

"Away!" repeated Fouquet. "If you set foot in this stairway before I call you, remember that you take the place of the vilest of your prisoners."

"I am in for it — no doubt of that!" grumbled Baisemeaux, as he withdrew with tottering steps.

The prisoner's cries resounded more and more formidably. Fouquet assured himself that Baisemeaux had reached the bottom of the steps before putting the key into the first lock. Then it was that he heard most distinctly the choking accents of the infuriated King.

"Help! I am the King! Help!"

The key to the second door was different from that of the first. Fouquet was obliged to look through the bunch. Meanwhile the King, enraged, maddened with passion, cried:

"It was M. Fouquet who had me brought here! Help me against M. Fouquet! I am the King! Help the King against M. Fouquet!"

The cries rent the minister's heart. They were followed by frightful blows upon the door with a chair which served the King as a battering-ram. At last Fouquet found the key. The King's strength was well-nigh spent. He no longer articulated, he roared:

"Death to Fouquet! Death to that traitor, Fouquet!"

The door opened.

CHAPTER L.

THE KING'S GRATITUDE.

THE two men were about to rush towards each other, but stopped suddenly as they came face to face, and uttered a cry of horror.

"Do you come to assassinate me, monsieur?" said the King, as he recognized Fouquet.

"Can this be the King!" murmured the minister.

Indeed, nothing could be more terrifying than the appearance of the young prince at the moment when Fouquet entered. His garments were in tatters. His undershirt, torn and gaping, was dripping with perspiration and blood which oozed from his lacerated breast and arms. Pale, haggard, foaming, with dishevelled hair, Louis XIV. presented a true picture of despair, hunger, and fear blended in a single image. Fouquet was so touched, so troubled, that he hastened to the King with arms outstretched and eyes filled with tears. Louis brandished before Fouquet the piece of wood of which he had made so furious use.

"Well," said Fouquet, in a trembling voice, "do you not know the truest of your friends?"

"A friend — you?" repeated Louis, grinding his teeth, with hatred and thirst for speedy revenge.

"A devoted servant," added Fouquet, falling on his knees.

The King let fall his weapon. Fouquet approached him, kissed his knees, and took him tenderly in his arms.

"My King! my child!" said he, "how you must have suffered!"

Louis, recalled to himself by the change in the situation, looked at himself and, ashamed of his disorder, ashamed of his rage, ashamed of the protection that he was receiving, drew back. Fouquet never understood this movement. He did not understand that the King's pride would never forgive him for having been witness to such weakness.

"Come, Sire, you are free," he said.

"Free?" repeated the King. "Oh! you give me my freedom after having dared to lift a hand against me?"

"You cannot believe that!" exclaimed Fouquet, warmly. "You cannot believe me guilty of such an action!"

And rapidly, vehemently even, he related all he knew of the details of the plot. While the story was being told, Louis underwent the most horrible anguish, and, when the tale was done, the greatness of the danger that he had run struck him as of vastly more importance than the secret relative to his twin brother.

"Monsieur," said he to Fouquet, suddenly, "this double birth is a lie; it is impossible that you can have been duped by it."

"Sire!"

"It is impossible, I tell you, that suspicion could have been cast upon the honor and the virtue of my mother. Has not my chief minister already meted out justice to the criminals?"

"Reflect well, Sire, before you lose your temper," replied Fouquet; "the birth of your brother —"

"I have only one brother; that is Monsieur. You know that as well as I. There is a plot, I tell you, beginning with the governor of the Bastille."

"Take care, Sire; this man has been deceived, like everybody else, by the prince's resemblance to you."

"His resemblance to me? Come, now!"

"Be that as it may, Marchiali must look very like your Majesty to deceive everybody," insisted Fouquet.

"Ridiculous!"

"Say not so, Sire. The men who made ready to brazen it out before your ministers, your mother, your officials, and your household — these men ought to be very certain about the resemblance."

"Indeed," murmured the King. "And these men — where are they?"

"At Vaux."

"At Vaux! And did you suffer them to remain there?"

"The most pressing duty, it seemed to me, was to liberate your Majesty. This I have accomplished. Now the King's orders shall be obeyed. I await your bidding."

Louis reflected a moment.

"Muster the troops of Paris," said he.

"All the orders are given to this effect," replied Fouquet.

"You have given such orders?" exclaimed the King.

"For that, yes, Sire. Your Majesty will be at the head of ten thousand men in an hour."

By way of answer the King seized Fouquet's hand with such

effusion that it was easy to see he had harbored a distrust for his minister until that remark, despite the latter's intervention.

"And with these troops," continued the King, "we will go to your house and surround the rebels, who must have entrenched themselves there."

"That would surprise me," replied Fouquet.

"Why?"

"Because their leader, the soul of the enterprise, having been unmasked by me, their whole plan has miscarried."

"You have unmasked this false prince himself?"

"No, I have not seen him."

"Whom, then?"

"The leader of the plot is not that unhappy man. The latter is only an instrument destined all his life to grief; this I clearly see."

"Absolutely!"

"The leader I referred to is M. l'Abbé d'Herblay, Bishop of Vannes."

"Your friend?"

"He was my friend, Sire," replied Fouquet, nobly.

"That is unfortunate for you," said the King, in a less kindly tone.

"Such friendships had nothing dishonorable in them, so long as I was ignorant of the crime, Sire."

"It should have been foreseen."

"If I am guilty, I place myself in your Majesty's hands."

"Ah! M. Fouquet, that is not what I had in mind," rejoined the King, displeased at having thus displayed the bitterness of his thought. "Well, I have this to say, that in spite of the mask which this wretch put over his face, I have had a vague idea that it was he. But with this leader was a man of great physique. The one who threatened me with his herculean strength — who was he?"

"It must have been his friend, the Baron du Vallon, the retired musketeer."

"The friend of D'Artagnan? the friend of the Comte de la Fère? Ah!" cried the King, stopping on this last name, "we must not overlook this relation between the conspirators and M. de Bragelonne."

"Sire, Sire, do not go too far! M. de la Fère is the most honest man in France. Content yourself with those whom I deliver over to you."

"With those whom you deliver over to me? Good! For you will deliver over the guilty ones, will you not?"

"How does your Majesty construe it?"

"I mean," replied the King, "that we shall presently reach Vaux with our troops, that we shall lay violent hands on this nest of vipers, and that none shall escape; none — is not that the word?"

"Will your Majesty put those men to death?" cried Fouquet.

"From first to last."

"Oh, Sire!"

"Let us come to a thorough understanding, M. Fouquet," said the King, haughtily. "I no longer live in a time when assassination was the only, the last resort of kings. No, God be praised! I have parliaments that judge in my name, and scaffolds whereon my supreme will is executed!"

Fouquet turned pale. "I will take the liberty," said he, "of calling your Majesty's attention to the fact that any open action touching those matters is a fatal scandal on the dignity of the throne. The august name of Anne of Austria must never be allowed to pass the lips of the people accompanied by a smile."

"Justice must be done, monsieur."

"Good, Sire; but the blood royal cannot be shed upon the scaffold."

"The blood royal! Do you believe that?" exclaimed the King, stamping the ground in his rage. "This double birth is an invention. There, above everything else, in that invention do I consider M. d'Herblay's crime to be. That is the crime I would punish rather than the violence, the insult."

"And punish with death?"

"With death, yes, monsieur."

"Sire," said the superintendent, with firmness, as he raised his head haughtily, "your Majesty will bring about the death — if it please you — of Philippe of France, your brother. That concerns you alone, and you may consult Anne of Austria, your royal mother. Whatever she may order will be well ordered. I do not wish to meddle in this matter further, not even for the honor of the crown; but I have one favor to ask of you; I now ask it."

"Speak," said the King, greatly troubled by the minister's last words. "What is it?"

"Pardon for M. d'Herblay and M. du Vallon."

"My assassins?"

"Two rebels, Sire, nothing more."

"Oh! I understand; you are asking pardon for your friends."

"My friends!" said Fouquet, deeply wounded.

"Yes, your friends; but the welfare of my government demands a signal punishment for the culprits."

"I will not remind your Majesty that I have just brought you your liberty, saved your life."

"Monsieur!"

"I will not remind you that if M. d'Herblay had wished to play the part of an assassin, he could simply have assassinated your Majesty this morning, in the forest of Sénart, and thus ended the whole affair."

The King shuddered.

"A pistol ball through the head," continued Fouquet, "and the face of Louis XIV. become unrecognizable, would have been a lasting pardon for M. d'Herblay."

The King grew livid with horror at thought of the peril he had run.

"M. d'Herblay," Fouquet went on, "if he had been an assassin, need not have told me his plot in order to succeed with it. Being rid of the true king, he would have made the false one free from suspicion. If the usurper had been recognized by Anne of Austria, he would still be her son. So far as M. d'Herblay's conscience were concerned, the usurper would still be a king of the blood of Louis XIII. Furthermore, the conspirator would have safety, secrecy, success. A pistol shot would have given him all that. Pardon for him, in the name of your own salvation, Sire!"

Instead of being touched by this picture, so true, of Aramis' generosity, the King felt himself cruelly humiliated. His unconquerable pride could not accustom itself to the idea that a mere man had held, suspended at the tip of his finger, the thread of a royal life. Every word thought by Fouquet to be efficacious in obtaining pardon for his friends carried a fresh drop of poison into the already ulcerated heart of Louis XIV. Nothing could bend him.

"I do not really know, monsieur," said he, impetuously, "just why you are asking pardon for these men. What is the good in asking for that which can be had unsolicited?"

"I do not understand you, Sire."

"Still, it is simple. Where am I?"

"In the Bastille, Sire."

"Yes, in a dungeon. I pass for a madman, do I not?"

"It is true, Sire."

"And no one is known here besides Marchiali?"

"Assuredly."

"Very well, then; change nothing in the situation. Leave the madman to rot in a dungeon of the Bastille, and M. d'Herblay and M. du Vallon will not need my pardon. Their new sovereign will absolve them."

"Your Majesty wrongs me, Sire, and is at fault," replied Fouquet, dryly. "I am not child enough, and M. d'Herblay is not bungler enough, to have neglected to think of all these things. And if, as you say, I had wished to make a new king, I would certainly not have found occasion to force all the doors of the Bastille to get you out. That would have been idiotic. Your Majesty is provoked to anger, otherwise you would not needlessly offend that one of your servants who has rendered you the most important service."

Louis saw that he had gone too far; that the doors of the Bastille were still closed upon him, while little by little the flood-gates were yielding, behind which the generous Fouquet had concealed his anger.

"I did not say that to you to humiliate you. God forbid, monsieur!" replied the King. "Only you are addressing me to obtain a pardon, and I am replying as my conscience dictates; so, following my conscience, the criminals of whom we speak are worthy neither of forgiveness nor pardon."

Fouquet was silent.

"What I shall do," added the King, "is as generous as what you have done; for I am in your power. I will even say that it is more generous, since you have placed before me certain conditions upon which may depend my liberty and my life; and the refusal of which may cost me both."

"I was wrong," replied Fouquet. "Yes, I admit that I gave the impression of extorting forgiveness from you. I am sorry and crave pardon of your Majesty."

"And you are pardoned, my dear M. Fouquet," said the King, with a smile that restored to his features the composure they had lacked since the events of the preceding evening.

"I have obtained my forgiveness," continued the minister, obstinately, "but how about M. d'Herblay and M. du Vallon?"

"They shall never obtain theirs while I live," replied the inflexible King. "Do me the kindness to speak no more of it."

"Your Majesty shall be obeyed."

"And you will not bear me any grudge?"

"Oh! no, Sire, for it is as I expected."

"You expected that I would refuse to pardon these gentlemen?"

"Certainly; and all my steps were taken accordingly."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the King, in surprise.

"M. d'Herblay came, so to speak, to give himself into my hands. M. d'Herblay left to me the happiness of saving my King and my country. I could not condemn M. d'Herblay to death. I could not expose him to the very justifiable anger of your Majesty; it would have been equivalent to killing him myself."

"Well, what did you do?"

"Sire, I gave M. d'Herblay my best horses, and they have four hours the start of any that your Majesty could send after him."

"That may be," muttered the King, "but still the world is large enough for my couriers to overtake your horses, despite the four hours' start that you have given M. d'Herblay."

"In giving him four hours the start, I knew I was giving him his life; and he will keep it."

"How is that?"

"After having gone at full speed, with four hours the start of your musketeers, he will reach my château of Belle-Isle, where I have given him an asylum."

"That may be. But you forget that you have given me Belle-Isle."

"But not for you to seize my friends."

"You take it back, then?"

"For that purpose, yes, Sire."

"My musketeers will take it again, and settle the matter."

"Neither your musketeers nor yet your whole army, Sire," said Fouquet, coldly. "Belle-Isle is impregnable."

The King became livid, and his eye flashed fire. Fouquet felt himself lost. But he was not one to recoil when the voice of honor was sounding. He stood unquailing under the King's fierce gaze. The latter swallowed his anger and said after a pause: "Shall we return to Vaux?"

"I await your Majesty's commands," replied Fouquet, bow-

ing low ; " but I believe your Majesty cannot omit changing your garb before appearing to your court."

" We shall pass by the Louvre," said the King. " Come."

And they departed, in the presence of the frightened Baisemeaux, who once again saw Marchiali leave, and who, at the sight, tore out the few hairs he had left. It is true that Fouquet gave him a discharge for the prisoner, and that the King wrote underneath :

" Seen and approved. Louis."

— A piece of madness that Baisemeaux, incapable of putting two ideas together, acknowledged by a terrific whack of his fist on his own jaws.

CHAPTER LI.

THE FALSE KING.

MEANWHILE at Vaux usurping royalty continued to play his part bravely. Philippe gave orders that there should be brought before him at his early morning reception the chief visitors who had been previously summoned to appear before the King. He concluded to give this order in spite of the absence of M. d'Herblay, who did not return, — for reasons which our readers already know. But the prince, believing that this absence could not be prolonged, desired, like all venturesome spirits, to risk his valor and his fortunes apart from all protection and all counsel.

Another reason urged him to this step. Anne of Austria would be present. The guilty mother would stand before her sacrificed son. Philippe did not wish, if he should display any weakness, to have as witness the man before whom, henceforth, he was to display so much strength.

Philippe opened the two panels of the door, and several persons entered silently. He did not stir while the valets were dressing him. He had observed closely the habits of his brother on the preceding evening. He played the king in a way to arouse no suspicions.

When he was fully dressed in a hunting costume, he received his callers. His memory and Aramis' notes kept him informed.

First came Anne of Austria, to whom Monsieur gave his hand ; then Madame with M. de Saint-Aignan. He smiled when he beheld these faces, but trembled on recognizing his mother. That figure so noble and imposing, bearing the marks of grief, came to his court to plead the cause of that famous queen who had sacrificed a son for reasons of state. He found his mother still beautiful. He knew that Louis XIV. loved her, and he promised himself to love her as well, and not to be a scourge to her declining years. He regarded Monsieur his brother with a tenderness easily understood. The latter had usurped nothing, had cast no cloud over his life. A separate branch, he had allowed the trunk to rise without envy of its elevation or the majesty of its life. Philippe promised himself to be a good brother to this prince who was satisfied with the gold that procured his pleasures. He bowed pleasantly to Saint-Aignan, who was smiling and bowing, and held out his hand tremblingly to Henrietta, his sister-in-law, whose beauty struck him. But he saw in the eyes of this princess a species of coldness that did not augur well for their future relations.

"How much easier will it be," thought he, "to be a brother to this woman than her gallant, if she evinces for me a coldness that my brother could not have for her, and which is imposed on me as a duty."

The only visit that he dreaded at this moment was that of the Queen. His heart and his courage had just been put to so severe a test, that despite their firmness they could hardly withstand a fresh shock. Luckily the Queen did not come.

Then commenced on the part of Anne of Austria a political dissertation on the welcome given by M. Fouquet to the House of France. She intermingled her attacks with compliments addressed to the King, with inquiries as to his health, with little motherly flatteries, and with diplomatic rules.

"Well, my son," said she, "have you arrived at any conclusion regarding M. Fouquet?"

"Saint-Aignan," said Philippe, "be good enough to inquire after the Queen."

At these words, the first that Philippe had uttered aloud, the slight difference between his voice and that of Louis XIV. was discernible to the mother's ears ; Anne of Austria looked fixedly at her son.

Saint-Aignan left the room. Philippe continued :

"Madame, I do not like to have M. Fouquet spoken ill of, you know that, and you yourself have spoken well of him."

"That is true; so I can only question you on your own opinions regarding him."

"Sire," said Henrietta, "I for my part have always liked M. Fouquet. He is a man of good taste — an excellent man."

"A superintendent who is never parsimonious," added Monsieur, "and who pays in gold all the drafts I make on him."

"Everybody thinks too much of himself here," observed the old queen. "Nobody thinks of the state. M. Fouquet — it is a fact — M. Fouquet is ruining the state."

"Come, mother," replied Philippe, in a lower tone, "have you also become a buckler for M. Colbert?"

"In what way?" said the old queen, in surprise.

"Why, in truth," responded Philippe, "you speak like your old friend, Madame de Chevreuse."

At mention of this name, Anne of Austria turned pale and bit her lip. Philippe had aroused the lioness.

"Why do you talk to me of Madame de Chevreuse?" said she, "and what grudge do you bear me to-day?"

Philippe continued: "Is not Madame de Chevreuse always in league against some one? Has she not been to see you, mother?"

"Monsieur, you are speaking to me after such fashion that I could almost believe it was the King, your father."

"My father did not fancy Madame de Chevreuse, and he had reason not to," said the prince; "and for my part, I do not like her any better. And if she wishes to come here, as she did formerly, to sow divisions and dislikes, under the pretence of begging for money, oh, well —"

"Oh, well!" said Anne of Austria, proudly, — herself provoking the storm.

"Oh, well," replied the young man, resolutely, "I will drive out of my kingdom Madame de Chevreuse, and with her all the workers of secrets and mysteries."

He had not calculated the effect of that terrible speech; or perhaps he had wished to judge its effect, like those who suffer from a chronic ailment seek to break the monotony of their pain by pressing upon their wound to induce a keener pain. Anne of Austria was near fainting. Her eyes, open but fixed, ceased to see for a moment. She extended her arms to her

other son, who supported her in his embrace without fear of irritating the King.

"Sire," murmured she, "you treat your mother cruelly."

"How, Madame?" replied he. "I am speaking only of Madame de Chevreuse. Does my mother prefer Madame de Chevreuse to the welfare of my state and the safety of my person? Well, I tell you that Madame de Chevreuse has come to France to borrow money, and that she has addressed herself to M. Fouquet to sell him a certain secret."

"A certain secret?" cried Anne of Austria.

"Concerning some pretended thefts committed by the superintendent—which is false," added Philippe. "M. Fouquet spurned her indignantly, preferring the King's favor to all complicity with intriguers. Then Madame de Chevreuse sold the secret to M. Colbert, and, as she is insatiable, and it did not suffice her to have extorted a hundred thousand crowns from that source, she has sought still higher to see if perchance she might discover still deeper springs. Is that true, Madame?"

"You know all, Sire," said the queen, more troubled than irritated.

"And so," continued Philippe, "I have the right to take note of this fury who comes to my court to plan the dishonor of some and the ruin of others. If God has suffered certain crimes to be committed, and has concealed them in the shadow of his clemency, I cannot allow Madame de Chevreuse the power to counteract the designs of God."

The last part of Philippe's speech had agitated the queen mother to such an extent that her son pitied her. He took her hand and kissed it tenderly. She did not perceive in that kiss, given despite the revulsions and rancors of his heart, that in it there was pardon for eight years of horrible suffering. Philippe paused a moment to choke down the emotions which had been aroused. Then with a sort of gayety he said:

"We will not leave to-day; I have a plan."

And he turned towards the door, hoping to see Aramis, whose absence had commenced to make him uneasy. The queen mother desired to take her leave.

"Remain a moment, mother," said he. "I wish you to make your peace with M. Fouquet."

"But I bear M. Fouquet no grudge; I only feared for his prodigalities."

"We will put that to rights, and exact nothing from the superintendent save his good qualities."

"Then what is your Majesty looking for?" said Henrietta, who saw the King looking again towards the door, and who desired to lodge a shaft in his heart; for she supposed that he was expecting La Vallière or a letter from her.

"My sister," said the young man, who had guessed her thought, thanks to that marvellous perspicuity which fortune had permitted him to exercise for the time being; "my sister, I am expecting an extremely distinguished man, a most skillful counsellor, whom I wish to present to you and to recommend to your good graces. Ah! Come in, D'Artagnan!"

D'Artagnan appeared.

"What are your Majesty's commands?"

"Where is M. the Bishop of Vannes, your friend?"

"But, Sire —"

"I am expecting him, but he does not come. Institute a search for him."

D'Artagnan remained a moment stupefied; but presently reflecting that Aramis had left Vaux secretly on a mission for the King, he concluded that the King wished the secret preserved.

"Sire," he replied, "does your Majesty absolutely demand that M. d'Herblay be brought before you?"

"Absolutely is not the word," replied Philippe, "I have no such need of him as that; but if he can be found —"

"I imagined so," said D'Artagnan to himself.

"Is this M. d'Herblay, Bishop of Vannes?" said the queen.

"Yes, Madame."

"A friend of M. Fouquet?"

"Yes, Madame; a former musketeer."

Anne of Austria colored.

"One of the four who formerly wrought such wonders."

The old queen repented having wished to bite; she broke off the conversation in order to keep the rest of her teeth.

"Whatever may be your choice, Sire," said she, "I am convinced it will be excellent."

A general bow greeted this remark.

"You will discover," continued Philippe, "the depth of M. de Richelieu without the avarice of M. de Mazarin."

"A prime minister, Sire?" asked Monsieur, in alarm.

"I will tell you all about it, brother; but it is singular that

M. d'Herblay is not here." And he called out: "Please inform M. Fouquet that I desire to speak with him. Oh! before you, before you; do not retire!"

M. de Saint-Aignan returned, bringing the satisfactory news that the Queen kept her bed only as a means of precaution, and in order to have strength enough to follow all the behests of the King. While search was being made for M. Fouquet and Aramis, the new King continued his tests quietly, and every one — the household, officers, valets — believed him to be the King, so similar were his gestures, voice, and manner. On his part, Philippe, applying to all the faces the minute description furnished by his accomplice, Aramis, so conducted himself as not to arouse a suspicion in the minds of those who surrounded him. Henceforward nothing could disturb the usurper. With what strange facility had Providence just reversed the loftiest station in the world, and substituted for it the lowliest! Philippe admired this goodness of God in his behalf, and seconded it with all the resources of his well-rounded character. But he felt, at times, as though a shadow were gliding between him and the rays of his new glory. Aramis did not appear.

The conversation had languished in the royal family. Philippe, preoccupied, had forgotten to dismiss his brother and Madame Henrietta. The latter were greatly surprised and began to lose patience. Anne of Austria leaned over towards her son and addressed him in Spanish.

Philippe was completely ignorant of this language; he grew pale in the presence of this unexpected obstacle. But, as if the spirit of the imperturbable Aramis had covered him with his infallibility, instead of becoming disconcerted, Philippe rose to the emergency.

"Well, what? Answer," said Anne of Austria.

"What is all that noise about?" asked Philippe, turning towards the door of the private staircase.

Just then they heard a voice crying out: "This way! this way! Only a few more steps, Sire!"

"M. Fouquet's voice," said D'Artagnan, beside the queen mother.

"M. d'Herblay cannot be far away," added Philippe.

But what he saw was far removed from what he expected to see. All eyes were turned towards the door through which M. Fouquet was to enter; but it was not he who came in.

A terrible cry resounded from every corner of the room — a cry of distress uttered by King and servants alike. It is not given to men — even to those whose destinies are intermingled with the strongest elements and the most wonderful accidents — to contemplate a scene like the one which offered itself at this moment in the royal chamber.

The half-closed shutters allowed the entry of only an uncertain light, toned down by the heavy velvet curtains, lined with silk. In this softened shadow, one's eyes dilated slowly, and each one of the courtiers saw the others by faith rather than by sight. Nevertheless, in these environments, not one of the details could be overlooked; and the new object which presented itself seemed as luminous as though lighted by the sun.

Thus it was with Louis XIV., when he showed himself, pale and frowning, under the curtain of the secret stairs. Behind him was Fouquet, his countenance stamped with sternness and sorrow.

The queen mother, who perceived Louis XIV., and who was holding Philippe's hand, uttered the cry we have alluded to, as though she had seen a ghost. Monsieur made a movement of astonishment, and kept turning his head from the King he had just descried to the one by his side. Madame advanced a step, believing she beheld her brother-in-law reflected in a glass; and indeed the illusion was possible.

The two princes, both totally unnerved, — for we shall not attempt to depict Philippe's frightful attitude, — both trembling and clinching their hands convulsively, measured each other with their glances, while their eyes darted poniard-like shafts into each other's soul. Mute, panting, alert, they seemed about to spring upon an enemy. This astounding resemblance of face, gesture, stature, everything, even to the similarity of costume, caused by accident, — for Louis XIV. had donned at the Louvre a suit of violet velvet, — this perfect analogy of the two princes, brought terror to the heart of Anne of Austria, and still the truth did not dawn upon her. There are misfortunes in life that nobody will accept. They prefer to believe in the supernatural, the impossible.

Louis had not counted on these obstacles. He expected that he had only to appear in order to be recognized. A living sun, he could not brook the suspicion of equality with any one. He would not admit anything but that every torch should become extinct the moment his conquering ray was seen. So

upon sight of Philippe he was perhaps more terrified than any one around him; and his silence, his immobility, were but intervals of concentration and calm which precede violent explosions of anger.

But Fouquet! who could portray his emotion and stupor in the presence of this living image of his master? Fouquet thought that Aramis was right, that the new-comer was a king as pure of blood as the other, and that, for having repudiated all participation in this *coup d'état*, so skilfully prepared by the Jesuit general, he must be an enthusiastic madman, unworthy ever again of dipping his hands into a political job. Besides, it was the blood of Louis XIII. that Fouquet was sacrificing to Louis XIII.'s blood; it was to a selfish ambition that he was offering up a noble ambition; it was to the right of keeping that he gave up the right of having. The whole extent of his error was revealed to him by the mere sight of the pretender.

All that passed in Fouquet's soul was lost upon the courtiers. He had five minutes in which to concentrate his thoughts on the points at issue with his conscience; five minutes, that is to say, five centuries, in which the two Kings and their family scarcely found time to breathe after so terrible a shock.

D'Artagnan, leaning against the wall opposite Fouquet, his hand on his brow, his eye fixed, asked himself the meaning of so wonderful a prodigy. He could not say immediately why he doubted; but he knew of a truth that he had reason to doubt, and that in this meeting of the two Louis lay all the gist of the matter which for the last few days had rendered the conduct of Aramis so suspicious to the musketeer. However, these ideas were enveloped in thick veils. The actors in the scene seemed to float in the vapors of an uncertain awakening.

Suddenly Louis XIV., more impatient and more accustomed to command, hastened to one of the shutters, opened it and tore away the curtains. A flood of light entered the room, causing Philippe to recoil to an alcove. This movement Louis seized upon eagerly, and turned to the queen, saying:

"Mother, do you not recognize your son — since every one here has forgotten his King?"

Anne of Austria trembled violently and raised her arms towards heaven, without being able to utter a word.

"Mother," said Philippe, in an even tone, "do you not know your son?"

And Louis recoiled in his turn.

As for Anne of Austria, she lost all self-control, being stricken by remorse in both head and heart. No one aiding her, — for all present were petrified, — she sank back on her divan and gave vent to a feeble sigh.

Louis could no longer endure this scene and this affront. He bounded towards D'Artagnan, of whom vertigo was getting the better, and who staggered and clutched at the door for support.

"Your aid, musketeer!" said he. "Look us in the face, and see which is the paler, he or I."

The cry aroused D'Artagnan and stirred in his heart the fibre of obedience. He shook his head, and without hesitating longer walked up to Philippe, laid his hand on his shoulder, and said:

"Monsieur, you are my prisoner!"

Philippe did not lift his eyes, nor budge from the spot, where he stood as though nailed, his eye deep-set and fixed on the King, his brother. In a sublime moment of silence he reproached him for all his unhappy past and for all the torments of his future. Against this language of the soul the King felt powerless. He lowered his eyes and led away his brother and sister precipitately, forgetting his mother stretched out motionless three paces away from the son whom she allowed, a second time, to be condemned to death. Philippe approached her and said in a gentle voice, but touched with nobleness:

"If I were not your son, I should curse you, my mother, for having made me so miserable."

D'Artagnan felt a shiver pass through the very marrow of his bones. He saluted the young prince respectfully, and said as he bowed:

"Pray excuse me, monseigneur; I am only a soldier and my oaths are to him who has just left the chamber."

"Thank you, M. d'Artagnan. But what has become of M. d'Herblay?"

"M. d'Herblay is in safety, monseigneur," said a voice behind them, "and no one, while I am living and free, shall disturb a hair of his head."

"M. Fouquet!" said the prince, smiling sadly.

"Pardon me, monseigneur," said Fouquet, bending the knee, "but he who has just gone was my guest."

"Here," murmured Philippe, with a sigh, "are brave friends

and good hearts. They make me regret the world. Forward, M. d'Artagnan, I am at your service."

Just as the captain of musketeers was on the point of leaving, Colbert appeared, handed D'Artagnan an order from the King, and retired.

D'Artagnan read it and crushed the paper angrily.

"What is it?" asked the prince.

"Read, monseigneur," replied the musketeer.

Philippe read these words, hurriedly traced by the hand of Louis XIV.:

"M. d'Artagnan will conduct the prisoner to the Île Sainte-Marguerite. He will cover his face with an iron mask, which the prisoner is not to raise under peril of his life."

"It is just," said Philippe, resignedly. "I am ready."

"Aramis was right," said Fouquet in an aside to the musketeer; "this one is a king as much as the other."

"More!" replied D'Artagnan; "he needs only you and me."

CHAPTER LII.

WHEREIN PORTHOS BELIEVES HE IS AFTER A DUKEDOM.

ARAMIS and Porthos, having profited by the time allowed them by Fouquet, did honor to the French cavalry by their speed. Porthos did not grasp the nature of the mission which demanded such swiftness; but as he saw Aramis spurring forward furiously, he himself spurred no less furiously. In this manner they soon put a dozen leagues between themselves and Vaux; then it became necessary to change horses and arrange a sort of relay. It was during one of these pauses that Porthos hazarded a discreet question to Aramis.

"Odds!" replied the latter, "'t is enough to know that our fortunes depend upon our speed."

As if Porthos had still been the musketeer of 1626, without sou or mail, he pressed on.

"Fortune" — magic word — always signifies something to the human ear. For those who have nothing it seems to say "enough;" for those who have enough, it seems to say "more."

"I shall be made a duke," remarked Porthos aloud. He was speaking to himself.

"It is possible," replied Aramis, smiling covertly, as Porthos' horse passed him. Nevertheless Aramis' head was on fire; the activity of his body had not yet succeeded in surmounting that of the mind. All that there is in raging anger, poignant toothache, and mortal peril, twisted, gnawed, and groaned in the brain of the vanquished prelate. His features bore very evident traces of this severe struggle. Free on the highway to give himself over to the impressions of the moment, Aramis did not restrain himself from swearing at every start of the horse or every roughness in the road. Pale, and at times dripping with steaming perspiration, and again dry and icy, he lashed the horses and lacerated their flanks.

Porthos grumbled at this, since his own leading fault was not sensibility.

Thus they sped forward for eight weary hours, and finally reached Orléans. It was four o'clock in the afternoon. Aramis searched his recollection of events, and came to the conclusion that nothing indicated the possibility of pursuit. It would be without example that a troop capable of taking Porthos and himself should be furnished with relays enough to cover forty leagues in eight hours. So, admitting a pursuit that was not in evidence, the fugitives had five good hours the start of their pursuers.

Aramis thought that it would not be imprudent to rest, but that to continue was the surer way. Indeed, twenty leagues more covered with the same rapidity, twenty leagues devoured, and not even D'Artagnan could overtake the enemies of the King. He therefore inflicted upon Porthos the grief of remounting his horse. They hastened on until seven in the evening, when but one more post remained between them and Blois. But there a diabolical mishap alarmed Aramis greatly; the horses were lacking at the post. The prelate asked himself by what infernal machination his enemies had deprived him of the means of going further. He who had not recognized chance as a god, and who found a cause for every result, preferred to believe that the refusal of the master of the post at such an hour in such a country was the result of an order emanating from above—an order given with a view to stopping short the king-maker in his flight.

But at the moment when he was about to make a scene—

in order to procure either a horse or an explanation — an idea occurred to him. He recalled that the Comte de la Fère lived near by.

"I am not travelling," said he, "and I do not want to go as far as the next post. Give me two horses to go to pay a visit to a nobleman, a friend of mine who lives in this vicinity."

"What nobleman?" asked the master of the post.

"M. le Comte de la Fère."

"Oh!" replied the man, uncovering with respect, "a worthy gentleman. But whatever may be my desire to be agreeable to him, I cannot let you have two horses. All of them at my post are retained for M. le Duc de Beaufort."

"Ah!" said Aramis, in a disappointed tone.

"Only," continued the postman, "if you don't mind taking a little coach that I have, I can hitch up an old blind horse that has little left besides his legs, and that will take you to the house of M. le Comte de la Fère."

"That would cost a louis," said Aramis.

"No, monsieur, it will cost only a crown; that is the price paid me by M. Grimaud, the count's steward, any time that he makes use of my coach, and I would not want M. le Comte to take me to task with having charged one of his friends too much."

"That shall be as you please," said Aramis, "and, above all, as it pleases the Comte de la Fère, whom I will certainly guard against disobliging. You shall have your crown, only I have the right to give you a louis for your idea."

"True enough," replied the master, greatly delighted. And he himself hitched the horse to the creaking vehicle.

Porthos' face was a study just then. He calculated that he had discovered the secret, and he felt pleased, first of all because a visit to Athos was particularly agreeable to him; and finally because he was in hopes of finding a good supper and a good bed.

The master having finished hitching up, suggested sending one of his valets to conduct the strangers to the La Fère estate. Porthos seated himself in the carriage with Aramis and whispered in his ear:

"I understand."

"Ah! ah!" responded Aramis, "and what do you understand, my friend?"

"We are going on behalf of the King to make some great proposal to Athos."

"Pooh!" said Aramis.

"Don't tell me anything," added the good Porthos, seating himself so as to avoid the jolting as much as possible, "don't tell me anything; I shall guess it all."

"Well, what is it, my friend? Guess, guess!"

About nine o'clock they reached Athos' door, guided by the light of a magnificent moon. The splendid glow rejoiced Porthos beyond expression; but Aramis seemed discomfited by it to an almost equal extent. He betrayed a little of his feelings to Porthos, who remarked:

"Well, I guess again. The mission is secret."

These were his last words in the carriage. The conductor interrupted them with the statement:

"Gentlemen, you are at your destination."

Porthos and his companion descended before the door of the little château. Here it is that we shall meet again with Athos and Bragelonne, both of whom had disappeared since the discovery of the faithlessness of La Vallière.

If any one saying be full of truth it is this: "Great griefs carry within themselves the germ of their consolation." Indeed, this grievous wound had drawn Raoul nearer to his father; and God knows if the consolations were sweet which poured from the eloquent lips and generous heart of Athos. The wound had never closed; but Athos, through conversation with his son and by infusing a little of his spirit into that of the young man, had made him see that this pang of the first infidelity is necessary to every human existence, and that no one has loved without knowing it. Raoul heeded often, but never understood. In a heart deeply smitten, nothing replaces the memory and the thought of the object loved. Raoul would answer his father thus:

"Monsieur, all you tell me is true. I believe that in matters of the heart none has suffered as much as you. But you are a man of too great intelligence, proven too much by misfortune, not to allow for the weakness of a soldier who suffers for the first time. I pay a tribute that I shall not pay a second time. Allow me to plunge so deeply into sorrow that I shall forget my very self and that I shall drown my reason."

"Raoul! Raoul!"

"Listen, monsieur. Never will I be able to accustom myself to the idea that Louise, the most chaste, the most innocent of

women, could have deceived so basely a man so honest and so loving as I. Never will I be able to bring before myself the vision of that sweet, good mask changing into a hypocritical and lascivious face. Louise lost! Louise infamous! Ah, monsieur! it is more cruel for me than though it were Raoul abandoned, Raoul miserable!"

Athos then employed heroic treatment. He defended Louise against Raoul, justifying her perfidy by her love.

"A woman who yields to the King because he is the King," said he, "merits the name of infamous; but Louise loves Louis. Young both of them, they have forgotten, he his rank, she her vows. Love absolves all things, Raoul. The two young people love in all sincerity."

And when he had given this dagger thrust, Athos would sigh as he saw Raoul leap away under the cruel wound and flee to the thickest part of the wood or to the refuge of his chamber, whence, an hour later, he would emerge pale, trembling, but subdued. Then coming back to Athos with a smile, he would kiss his hand like a dog that has been beaten fawns on a good master to atone for his fault. Raoul heeded only his weakness and confessed only his sorrow.

Thus passed the days following the scene in which Athos had so violently disturbed the indomitable pride of the King. Never in talking with his son had he alluded to that scene. Never had he given him the details of this vigorous attack which perhaps would have consoled the young man by showing him his rival brought low. Athos did not desire that the offended lover should forget the respect due the King. And when Bragelonne, warmly, furiously, or darkly spoke with scorn about royal promises, and of the equivocal faith which certain madmen obtained in a word let fall from the throne; when, passing over two centuries with the swiftness of a bird crossing a strait leading from one world to another, Raoul would predict a time when kings would seem smaller than other men, Athos would remark in a serene, persuasive voice:

"You are right, Raoul; all that you prophesy will come to pass. Kings will lose their prestige like burnt-out stars lose their light. But when that moment comes we shall be no more. And bear well in mind what I tell you: in this world we must all — men, women, and kings — live in the present. We can live in the future only by living for God."

In this fashion were Athos and Raoul conversing, as usual,

while traversing the long avenue of lindens in the park, when suddenly the bell, which served to announce to the count either the hour for a repast or a visitor, was rung. Mechanically and without attaching any importance to the summons, he walked back with his son, when at the entrance of the avenue they found themselves facing Porthos and Aramis.

CHAPTER LIII.

LAST FAREWELLS.

UTTERING a cry of joy, Raoul clasped Porthos tenderly in his arms. As for Aramis and Athos, they embraced as old men embrace; indeed, Aramis on his part felt that this embrace was somewhat in the nature of a question, and he said, when it was over :

“My friend, we cannot stay with you very long.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the count.

“Only long enough to tell you of my good fortune,” added Porthos.

“Ah!” said Raoul.

Athos gazed in silence at Aramis, whose gloomy demeanor seemed to be but little in harmony with the good news announced by Porthos.

“And what may be this good fortune which is about to happen to you?” asked Raoul, with a smile.

“The King is going to make me a duke,” whispered honest Porthos, with an air of mystery, in the young man’s ear; “a duke by letters patent!”

But even the whispers of Porthos were always loud enough to be heard by anybody in his neighborhood; one of his murmurs ran through the diapason of an ordinary bellow.

Athos heard him and gave vent to an exclamation that startled Aramis.

The bishop took the count’s arm, and after requesting Porthos’ leave to talk with him a few moments in private, said :

“My dear Athos, I am heart-broken.”

“Heart-broken!” cried the count; “my dear friend!”

“A few words will explain my position. I have conspired against the King; the conspiracy has failed, and I have no

doubt but that I am the object of pursuit at the present moment."

"Pursuit! conspiracy! My dear friend, what is this you are saying?"

"The sad truth — I am simply ruined."

"But Porthos — the title of duke — what does it all mean?"

"Ah! that is the occasion of my keenest regret; that is the bitterest pang of all. Believing that failure was impossible, I have drawn Porthos into the conspiracy. Without the slightest idea of what it was all about, he flung himself into it with all his energy, as, indeed, you know he does into every enterprise; and now that he has compromised himself with me, he is as completely ruined as I am."

"Good God!"

And Athos turned round to look at Porthos, who was smiling at them genially.

"But I had best let you know everything. Listen," continued Aramis.

And he related the facts with which we are already acquainted.

At several points in the narrative Athos could feel the perspiration breaking out on his forehead.

"It was a great idea," said he; "but it was a great fault."

"For which I am punished, Athos."

"And so I do not care to tell you all that I think of it."

"Do so."

"It was a crime."

"And a capital crime; I am aware of that. High treason!"

"Porthos! poor Porthos!"

"But what would you have me do? Success, as I have told you, seemed certain."

"M. Fouquet is an honest man."

"And I a fool for judging him so badly," returned Aramis. "Alas for the wisdom of men! alas for the huge millstone that grinds a world to powder, and that is itself, some day or other, stopped by a grain of sand which gets into its mechanism, we know not how or why!"

"Stopped by a diamond, rather, Aramis. But the mischief is accomplished. What do you reckon on doing?"

"I am taking Porthos away with me. Never will the King be brought to believe that the honest fellow has acted in per-

fect innocence ; never will he be brought to believe that Porthos thought all the time that he was serving the King. His head would pay for my fault. I am determined that that shall never be."

"Where are you taking him ?"

"To Belle-Isle, first. It is an impregnable refuge. From there I can sail, either to England, where I am in touch with a good many people —"

"To England ? You say you are —"

"Yes. Or else to Spain, where I am in touch with more people still —"

"But if you exile Porthos you ruin him. The King will confiscate his estates."

"All that has been provided against. Once in Spain, I have the means of healing the breach between myself and Louis XIV. and enabling Porthos to regain his favor also."

"I see you have influence, Aramis!" said Athos, guardedly.

"Ay, and a good deal of it — always at the service of my friends, friend Athos."

The words were accompanied by a frank pressure of the hand.

"I thank you," replied the count.

"And now that we have come to the subject," continued Aramis, "you are something of a malcontent yourself, Athos. You, and Raoul as well, have grave causes of complaint against the King. Follow our example. Come with us to Belle-Isle. Then we'll see — I pledge you my word of honor that, in a month, you'll have a war breaking out between France and Spain, and all on account of this same son of Louis XIII., who is a Spanish Infante, too, and who is held in such inhuman durance by France. Now, since Louis XIV. will not be at all anxious to continue a war originating in such a cause, I am willing to pledge myself to the certainty of a settlement that will make me and Porthos *grande*es in Spain, and you who are a *grandee* already, a duke in France. What do you say to it ? Do you agree ?"

"No. I far prefer to have good grounds for criticising the King's conduct. It has always been a source of pride to my race to claim a superiority over royal races. If I accepted your proposal I should, in some sort, become the King's debtor, and, though I might be a gainer in that respect, I should be a loser in relation to my conscience. Thanks."

"Then grant me two things, Athos : your absolution —"

"Oh, you have it, if you really wished to take the part of the weak and oppressed against the oppressor."

"That is all I want," answered Aramis, with a blush which the night concealed. "And now, give me your two best horses to gain the second post, as I have been refused any, the pretext given being that M. de Beaufort is making a tour in these quarters."

"You shall have my two best horses, Aramis, and — take care of Porthos!"

"Oh, have no fear as to that. And, by the way, do you think what I am doing is the best for him?"

"Yes, now that the evil is past repairing. The King would never pardon him. Then you will always have the support of M. Fouquet, no matter how things turn out. He will not abandon you, being also very much compromised, in spite of his heroic exploit."

"You are right. And that is the reason why, in place of putting out to sea at once, — which would be a confession of my fear and of my guilt, — I have decided to remain on French soil. Moreover, I can make of Belle-Isle any soil I please — English, Spanish, or Roman; it will all depend on the standard I choose to hoist."

"How can that be?"

"Well, I fortified Belle-Isle, and no one can take Belle-Isle so long as I object. Besides, as you said a while ago, M. Fouquet has something to say in the matter. Belle-Isle will not be attacked without the signature of M. Fouquet."

"That is true. But be cautious. The King is crafty, and he is strong as well."

Aramis smiled.

"And — take care of Porthos," repeated the count, with a kind of stern persistence.

"Nothing can befall our brother Porthos, count, that does not also befall me," answered Aramis, in the same tone.

Athos bowed as he shook hands with Aramis; then he embraced Porthos with great emotion.

"I was born to good luck, was I not?" murmured Porthos, in a state of ecstasy, wrapping his cloak about him.

"Come along, my dear fellow," said Aramis.

Raoul had gone out to see to the saddling of the horses and to give other orders.

The group had now broken up. When Athos saw his two

friends on the point of starting, something like a mist passed across his eyes and weighed upon his heart.

"Strange!" he muttered. "How is it that I have such a yearning to embrace Porthos a second time?"

At that very moment Porthos had happened to turn round. He ran up to his old friend with open arms.

This last embrace was as tender as if they were still in the flush of youth, when hearts were warm and life was joyous.

Then Porthos mounted. Aramis also came back and threw his arms about the neck of Athos.

The count stood gazing after them, their forms in their white cloaks elongated in the darkness as they rode along the highway. Like two phantoms they seemed to loom up larger as they rose from the earth; the fog did not hide them, and they were in sight until they disappeared in the declivity of the ground. At the end of the perspective it looked as if both, with a sudden spring, had leaped into the air and vanished among the clouds.

Then Athos returned to the house feeling terribly dejected.

"Raoul," said he, "something or other tells me that I have seen these two men for the last time."

"I am not surprised, monsieur," answered the young man, "that you should have such an idea, for I feel the same way myself at this very moment, and I, too, never expect to see M. d'Herblay and M. du Vallon again."

"Oh, you speak like a man saddened by another cause, everything looks black to your eyes; but you are young, and should you chance never to see these old friends, it will be because they no longer live in a world where you have many years still to spend. As for me, however —"

Raoul shook his head and leaned gently on the count's shoulder. Their hearts were so full that further speech was denied them.

Suddenly their attention was attracted towards the extremity of the road to Blois by a noise of men and horses in that direction.

Torch-bearers were merrily waving their torches among the trees that lined the path along which they were riding, and turned round, from time to time, to avoid out-distancing the cavaliers behind them.

The flames, the uproar, the dust created by a dozen steeds, richly caparisoned — and all this in the middle of the night —

formed a singular contrast to the silent, funereal disappearance of the two shadows of Porthos and Aramis.

Athos returned to the house.

But just as he had reached the flower-garden, the entrance-gate appeared to be in a blaze; all the torches had come to a halt and seemed to be actually setting the road on fire. A cry was heard of "M. le Duc de Beaufort!"

Athos sprang towards the door of his house.

The duke had already alighted, and was looking around him.

"I am here, monseigneur," said Athos.

"Ah! good evening, my dear count," answered the prince, with that frank cordiality that won him so many hearts. "Is it too late for the visit of a friend?"

"Oh! monseigneur, be pleased to enter," replied the count.

And leaning upon the arm of Athos, M. de Beaufort entered, followed by Raoul, who walked respectfully and modestly in the midst of the officers of the prince, among whom he had several friends.

CHAPTER LIV.

M. DE BEAUFORT.

THE prince turned round at the moment when Raoul, desirous of leaving him alone with Athos, was closing the door and preparing to accompany the officers into the next chamber.

"Is that the young lad about whom M. le Prince speaks in such high terms?" inquired M. de Beaufort.

"Yes, monseigneur, it is."

"He is a real soldier! Let him stay, count."

"Remain, Raoul, since monseigneur permits you," said Athos.

"What a tall, handsome fellow he is, *ma foi!*" continued the duke. "Would you give him to me if I asked him?"

"How am I to understand that, monseigneur?" inquired Athos.

"I have come here to take leave of you."

"To take leave of me, monseigneur?"

"Yes, undoubtedly. You have no idea of what I am going to be?"

"What you have always been, monseigneur, a valiant prince and an excellent gentleman."

"I am going to be an African prince and a Bedouin gentleman. The King is sending me to make conquest among the Arabs."

"What is this you are telling me, monseigneur?"

"Queer, is it not? I, so essentially Parisian, I, who have ruled the faubourgs, and been styled the King of the Halles, I to pass from the Place Maubert to the minarets of Djidgelli, to turn from a Frondeur into an adventurer!"

"Oh, monseigneur, if I did not hear it from your own lips —"

"It would sound incredible, would n't it? But you may believe me, so let us say good-bye. You see what getting into favor again means."

"Into favor?"

"Yes; you smile? And, my dear count, do you know why I accepted the offer? Are you quite sure you know?"

"Because your Highness loves glory better than anything else in the world."

"Oh, not at all. There's nothing glorious, so far as I can see, in firing off muskets at savages. No, glory had nothing to do with it. It's not unlikely I'll find something quite different in these quarters. No; but — you are listening, count? — I have determined that my life should present this odd phase of itself in the end, after the many whimsical spectacles it has afforded the world during the last fifty years. And you will yourself acknowledge that it is rather strange for a man who has been born a king's son, has made war on kings, has been reckoned among the forces of the century, has always stoutly maintained his rank, a man who feels the blood of Henri IV. stirring in him, and is grand admiral of France, — you will acknowledge it is strange for a man of that sort to go and get himself killed at Djidgelli, among all these Turks, Saracens, and Moors."

"Monseigneur," answered Athos, troubled, "the manner in which you dwell on this subject is singular. How can you imagine that such a brilliant destiny as yours is likely to find its consummation in such a miserable ending?"

"Do you suppose for a moment, my precise and ingenuous friend, that because I am going to Africa for such a ridiculous reason, I am likely to quit it in a fashion that will make me ridiculous? Do you suppose I shall not give the world good grounds for talking of me? Do you suppose that I, although grand admiral of France, descendant of Henri IV., and King of

Paris, can set people talking of me unless I get killed, with such contemporaries as Turenne and Condé? *Cordieu!* I shall be talked about, take my word for it. I shall be killed, whether or no. If not there, somewhere else."

"Nonsense, monseigneur," rejoined Athos. "This is all extravagance, and the only thing in which you have shown extravagance hitherto has been in your bravery."

"*Peste!* my friend, there is a sort of bravery in facing scurvy and dysentery and locusts and poisoned arrows, like my ancestor Saint Louis. Did you know that those rascals still used poisoned arrows? And then we have been a long time acquainted, and you know that when I come to a resolution, I stick to it."

"Yes, you stuck to your resolution to get out of Vincennes, monseigneur."

"Yes, and you helped me there, my master. And, by the way, though I have been looking this way and that, I have n't caught a glimpse of my old friend, M. Vaugrimaud. How is he getting along?"

"M. Vaugrimaud is, as ever, your Highness's most respectful servant," replied Athos, smiling.

"I have a hundred pistoles about me which I am bringing him as a legacy. I have made my will, count."

"Indeed, monseigneur!"

"And you know if Grimaud's name were seen among my legatees —"

The duke burst out laughing. Then addressing Raoul, who ever since the beginning of this conversation had been plunged in a deep reverie :

"My young friend," said he, "I remember a certain Vouvray wine here, if I do not mistake —"

Raoul left the room hurriedly to see that the duke was served with it. When he was outside the door, M. de Beaufort took the hand of Athos.

"What do you intend doing with him?" he asked.

"Nothing at present, monseigneur," answered Athos.

"Ah, I understand; since the King's passion for — La Vallière."

"Yes, monseigneur."

"So all that's true, then? — I have seen little Vallière somewhere, I think. She did not seem to me to be very beautiful —"

"No, monseigneur," said Athos.

"Do you know of whom she reminded me?"

"She reminded your Highness of some one?"

"Yes, of a rather pleasing young person, whose mother lived in the Halles —"

"Ah!" said Athos, with a smile.

"What glorious times those were!" added M. de Beaufort.

"Yes, La Vallière reminded me of that girl."

"Who had a son, had she not?"

"I think so," replied the duke, with a careless naturalness and a complaisant indifference, the tone and vocal expression of which no words could translate. "But there is our poor Raoul, who is your son, beyond any doubt, eh?"

"Yes, he is my son, monseigneur."

"And the poor lad has been thrown on his beam ends by the King, and is sulky?"

"Oh, better than that, monseigneur; he knows how to control his feelings."

"And you would let a fellow like that rust in idleness? It's a shame. Come, now, give him to me."

"I prefer keeping him, monseigneur. He is all I have left, and so long as he likes to stay with me —"

"Oh, very well," answered the duke. "I could have soon set him up, however. I assure you he is of the stuff out of which French marshals are carved; I have seen more than one marshal made out of just that kind of stuff."

"Possibly, monseigneur. But it is the King who makes marshals, and Raoul would never accept a favor from the King."

Raoul's return interrupted the conversation. He was followed by Grimaud, whose hands, steady in spite of his years, carried a tray bearing a glass and a bottle of the duke's favorite wine.

Upon seeing the old man the duke gave vent to a cry of delight.

"Grimaud! Good evening, Grimaud," said he. "How goes it?"

The servant, quite as delighted as the duke himself, made him a profound bow.

"Two old cronies!" said De Beaufort, shaking Grimaud's shoulder vigorously.

Whereat Grimaud made a still lower and more delighted inclination.

"What do I see there, count? Only a single glass!"

"I may not drink with your Highness until you invite me," said Athos, with noble humility.

"*Cordieu!* you did right in having only a single glass brought in. We'll drink out of it together, like two brothers in arms. You first, count."

"Let the honor you do me be without any drawback," answered Athos, gently putting aside the glass.

"You are a charming friend," rejoined the duke, who drank and passed the goblet to his companion. "But I have not done yet," he continued, "I am still thirsty, and I wish to do the honors to the fine young fellow who is standing there before us. I bring good luck with me, viscount," said he to Raoul. "Wish for something while you are drinking out of my glass, and may I be hanged if what you wish does n't happen!"

He handed the goblet to Raoul, who hurriedly moistened his lips, and said with the same quickness:

"I have wished for something, monsieur."

His eyes shone with a gloomy light, the blood had surged to his cheeks, and there was a smile on his lips that terrified Athos.

"And what did you wish for?" said the duke, at the same time handing the bottle and a purse to Grimaud.

"Monseigneur, will you promise to grant my wish?"

"*Pardieu!* I have promised already."

"I wished, M. le Duc, to go with you to Djidgelli."

Athos turned pale and was unable to conceal his agitation.

The duke gazed at his friend, as if he would aid him in parrying this unforeseen stroke.

"It is difficult, my dear viscount, very difficult," he added, in a low voice.

"Excuse me, monseigneur," said Raoul, firmly, "I may have been indiscreet, but since you yourself invited me to form a wish —"

"Wish to quit me," said Athos.

"Oh, monsieur! can you believe that?"

"Well, *mordieu!*" cried the duke, "our young friend is right; what is he going to do here? Simply rot away with grief."

Raoul reddened; the prince, growing heated, ran on:

"War will distract him. In war you can gain everything, and lose only one thing, life. That is so much the worse."

"Ah!" cried Raoul, quickly, "you can lose memory, and that is so much the better!"

He repented of having spoken so passionately, when he saw Athos rise and turn to open the window.

He knew his father did so to hide his emotion, and hurried up to him. But Athos had already recovered his composure, for when he turned his face to the lights, it was serene and impassive.

"Well, does he go or does he not? If he does, count, he shall be my *aide-de-camp* and my son."

"Monseigneur!" exclaimed Raoul, bending his knee.

"Monseigneur!" exclaimed Athos, taking the duke's hand, "Raoul shall do as he wishes."

"Oh! no, monsieur, but what you wish," interrupted the young man.

"*Par la corbleu!*" cried the duke, in his turn, "it is neither the count nor the viscount who shall do as he wishes here, it is I. I'll take him with me. He will have a splendid prospect in the navy, my friend."

The smile with which Raoul answered was so sad that Athos felt heart-broken, and gazed at him reproachfully.

Raoul saw the look on his father's face, and understood it. He regained his self-control, and became so guarded that not a word escaped his lips.

The duke rose, for he began to perceive that it was growing very late, and said abruptly:

"I am in a great hurry; but if I am told that I have wasted my time in talking with a friend, I can at least answer that I have gained a good recruit."

"Pardon me, M. le Duc," interrupted Raoul, "but do not say so to the King, for it is not the King I should care to serve."

"And whom will you serve, then, my friend? The time is past when you might have said: 'I belong to M. de Beaufort.' No, to-day we all, great and small, belong to the King. So if you serve aboard my vessels, let there be no mistake about it, my dear viscount, the King is the person you are serving."

Athos waited for Raoul's reply to this embarrassing question with a sort of impatient joy. The father hoped that the son might find this an insurmountable obstacle. The unrelenting enemy of his rival, the King, surely he could not serve him.

Athos was almost grateful to M. de Beaufort, whose levity or generous reconsideration had thus rendered unlikely the departure of the son who was his only comfort.

But Raoul replied firmly and quietly :

“M. le Duc, the objection which you have put I have already answered in my own mind. I will serve on board your vessels, since you are so kind as to take me, but there I shall be serving a master mightier than the King, I shall be serving God.”

“God ! What do you mean ?” cried Athos and De Beaufort together.

“My intention is to make my profession and become a Knight of Malta,” added Bragelonne, letting fall, one by one, words more icy than the drops that fall from the leafless trees after the storms of winter.

This was the last blow. Athos staggered, and the prince was himself moved.

Grimaud uttered a hollow groan, and dropped the bottle, which was shattered on the floor, without any one noticing it.

The prince examined the young man’s face, and what he read there, although Raoul’s eyes were cast down, was a fiery determination before which everything must give way.

As for Athos, he was so well acquainted with that tender yet inflexible soul that he despaired of turning it aside from the path it had chosen. He grasped the hand the duke had offered him.

“Count, I start for Toulon in two days. Will you call on me in Paris and let me know what resolution you have come to ?”

“I will have the honor of thanking you there for all your kindness, prince,” answered the count.

“And bring the viscount with you ; whether he follow me or not,” added the duke, “he has my word ; I ask only for yours.”

After shedding such balm as he could on the wound in the father’s heart, he fell to pulling the ear of old Grimaud, who winked his eyes in a far from natural fashion. Then he joined his escort in the garden.

The horses, after resting during the beautiful night and awaking up quite fresh, soon put a considerable distance between their master and the château, and Athos and Raoul were left to themselves.

It was striking eleven.

The silence which father and son kept towards each other would have been judged by an intelligent observer to be charged with crying and sobbing.

But these two men were of such peculiar temper that every emotion was driven back and disappeared when they were resolved to confine it within the recesses of their hearts.

They passed, therefore, in silence, almost gasping for breath, the hour that precedes midnight. The striking of the clock alone indicated the duration of the dolorous journey made by their souls through the immensity of past memories and future fears.

Athos was the first to rise, saying :

“It is late — till to-morrow, Raoul!”

Raoul rose in turn, and embraced his father.

The count pressed him to his heart, and said, in a voice he tried in vain to steady :

“Two days, and you will have left me, Raoul, left me forever !”

“Monsieur,” he answered, “I had come to a resolution,— it was to run a sword through my heart. But you would have regarded such an act as cowardly ; I renounced it ; then it became necessary for us to part.”

“But you are abandoning me, Raoul, now that you are going away.”

“Hear me, monsieur, I entreat you. If I do not go away, I must die of grief and love. I know the limit that is set to my life here. Send me away at once, monsieur, or you will see me expire basely in your house and before your very eyes. This is stronger than my will, stronger than my strength. You must have seen that I have lived thirty years during the last month, and that I am drawing near to the end of my life.”

“So,” said Athos, sternly, “you go to Africa for the purpose of getting killed there ? Oh, confess it. Do not lie.”

Raoul turned pale, and was silent for a couple of seconds, seconds that were hours of agony for his father. Then he broke out :

“Monsieur, I have promised to give myself to God. In exchange for the sacrifice of my youth and liberty, I ask Him for only one thing—to preserve me for your sake, because you are the only link that binds me to life. God alone can give me the strength to save me from forgetting that I owe

everything to you, and should consider you above everything."

Athos tenderly embraced his son, and said :

"You have pledged me your word as a gentleman ; it is enough. In two days we shall meet M. de Beaufort at Paris ; you will then do whatever you judge proper. You are free, Raoul. Adieu !"

And he made his way slowly to his bed-chamber.

Raoul went down into the garden, where he spent the night in the avenue of lindens.

CHAPTER LV.

PREPARATIONS FOR DEPARTURE.

ATHOS did not waste any time in combating this immutable resolution. He devoted all his attention to the preparations necessary to equip Raoul for his voyage during the two days granted him by the duke. His principal agent in this task was Grimaud, who devoted himself to it with all the zeal and intelligence that characterized him.

Athos ordered him to start for Paris when all arrangements had been duly made ; and to avoid keeping the duke waiting or delaying Raoul so long that the duke might notice his absence, he himself set out for Paris on the next day in the company of his son.

This return to Paris aroused an emotion that may easily be understood in the bosom of the unfortunate young man, who was now likely to meet those who had known and loved him.

Every face recalled to him who had so suffered, a suffering ; to him who had so loved, some incident connected with his love. Raoul approached Paris with death in his soul. After his arrival he really ceased to live. When he reached De Guiche's apartments, he was told that M. de Guiche was with Monsieur.

Raoul then directed his steps towards the Luxembourg. When over there, although never suspecting that he was now in the place where La Vallière had dwelt, he heard so

much music and breathed so many perfumes, heard such merry laughter and saw so many dancing shadows, that, had not a charitable woman caught sight of his pale, dejected countenance beneath a doorway, he would have gone back never to return.

But, as we have said, he had halted in his course in one of the first antechambers, solely to avoid coming in contact with the happy beings he felt were moving around in the adjacent halls.

One of Monsieur's valets recognized him and asked if he wished to see Monsieur or Madame. Raoul scarcely answered him, and fell upon a bench near the velvet hangings of the doorway, his eyes fixed on a clock that had stopped an hour before.

The valet passed on. Another valet, who was better acquainted with him, came up and inquired if he should announce his presence to M. de Guiche. But the name failed to arouse the attention of poor Raoul. The valet, however, was persistent. He began a story of a new lottery game which De Guiche had just invented and taught the ladies.

Raoul's only reply was to open his eyes to their widest extent, like the absent-minded man in Theophrastus; but his sadness assumed a darker hue than ever.

After this, with head fallen back and limbs relaxed, and mouth half open for the escape of the sighs that rose from his breast, he remained undisturbed in the antechamber, when suddenly a robe rustled against the door of a side drawing-room that opened into the gallery. A pretty young woman entered, laughing, and at the same time scolding one of the officers on duty with great energy. The officer replied calmly and firmly; it was, evidently, a quarrel between lovers rather than a quarrel between courtiers, and was terminated by a kiss on the lady's fingers.

But when the lady perceived Raoul, she became silent, and pushing away the officer:

"Begone, Malicorne," said she; "I had no idea there was any one here. If we have been seen or heard, God help you!"

Whereupon Malicorne took to his heels. The young lady advanced behind Raoul, and leaning over him:

"You are a gentleman, monsieur," said she, "and, therefore —"

She paused and uttered a cry.

"Raoul!" she exclaimed, reddening.

"Mademoiselle de Montalais!" answered Raoul, paler than death.

He rose, tottering, and tried to make his way across the slippery mosaic of the floor. But she had already grasped the nature of his wild and savage agony, and she felt that his avoidance of her was an accusation or at least a suspicion.

Being a woman who was ever on the watch, she did not think she should let such an opportunity slip of justifying herself. She stopped Raoul in the middle of the gallery; he did not seem inclined to surrender, however, without a struggle.

The air he assumed was so stern that any courtier who might have happened to come on them suddenly would no longer have had any doubt as to the part played by Mademoiselle de Montalais in a certain intrigue.

"Ah! monsieur," she said, scornfully, "your conduct on the present occasion is but little worthy of a gentleman. My heart prompts me to speak with you, and you compromise me by a reception that is hardly even civil. You are wrong, monsieur, and you confound your friends with your enemies. Adieu!"

Raoul had sworn never to speak of Louise or to look at those who had seen her. He was going into another world to avoid seeing what Louise had seen, touching what Louise had touched. But after the first shock given to his pride, after the first glance at Montalais, Louise's companion, the woman who recalled the memory of the little turret at Blois and all the joys of his youth, his reason vanished.

"Forgive me, mademoiselle," said he, "but it does not, it cannot enter my thoughts to be else than civil."

"Do you wish to speak to me?" she asked, with the smile of other days. "Then come with me; we might be surprised here."

"Where?" he inquired.

She looked at the clock as if undecided. Then, apparently satisfied with what it told her:

"Into my own apartments," she continued; "we have an hour to ourselves."

And darting up the stairs lighter than a fairy, she entered her chamber. Raoul followed her. She closed the door and handed to her maid the mantle she had on her arm.

"You are looking for M. de Guiche?" said she to Raoul.

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"I will ask him to come up here after I have talked with you."

"Do so, mademoiselle."

"You are angry with me, are you not?"

Raoul stared at her for a moment; then, casting down his eyes:

"Yes," he answered.

"You think I was a party to the plot that brought about your rupture?"

"Rupture!" he replied, bitterly. "Oh, mademoiselle, there could be no rupture where there never had been any love."

"You are mistaken," answered Montalais; "Louise was fond of you."

Raoul started.

"Oh, I don't mean exactly that she loved you as a lover. But she was fond of you, and you ought to have married her before starting for London."

Raoul burst into a fit of sinister laughter that made Montalais shiver.

"You speak quite at your ease, mademoiselle. Does a man always wed the woman he loves? You seem to forget that the King had already made the person of whom you speak his mistress."

"Hear me," said she, pressing the cold hands of Raoul in her own, "you have been wrong in every respect; a man of your age should not have left a woman of hers alone."

"So, then, good faith has fled from the world?" said Raoul.

"Yes, M. le Vicomte," answered Montalais, coolly. "Still, it is right you should know that if, instead of loving Louise coldly and philosophically, you had awakened her love—"

"Enough, enough, mademoiselle," said Raoul. "I feel that I belong to another age. You all, men and women, can laugh pleasantly and banter charmingly. But I, I loved, loved Mademoiselle de—"

He could not pronounce the name.

"I loved her, and, loving her, had faith in her. Now that I have lost my faith in her, I no longer love her."

"Oh! M. le Vicomte!" exclaimed Montalais, pointing to a mirror.

"I know what you mean, mademoiselle. Yes, I am very much changed, am I not? And do you know why? It is because my face is the mirror of my heart; I am changed within just as I am without."

"You have been consoled, I suppose?" said Montalais, sourly.

"No, I shall never be consoled."

"Then you will seem incomprehensible to everybody, M. de Bragelonne."

"That does not concern me. I comprehend myself, and that is enough."

"You have not even made an effort to communicate with Louise?"

"I!" cried the young man, his eyes flashing, "I! Really? Why do you not advise me to marry her? Perhaps the King would consent now!"

And he rose up in furious anger.

"I see," observed Montalais, "that you are not cured, and that Louise has one enemy the more."

"An enemy the more?"

"Yes, there is little love for favorites at the French court."

"Oh, so long as she has her lover to defend her, what need she fear? She took care that his rank should be too lofty to permit any of her enemies to prevail against her."

Then, after a pause.

"Besides, she has you for a friend, mademoiselle," he added with a slight touch of irony which almost pierced the armor of the maid of honor.

"I? Oh, no! I am no longer one of those whom Mademoiselle de la Vallière condescends to regard with favor. But —"

This *but*, so big with threats and storms; this *but*, which set the heart of Raoul palpitating, because it was so ominous of sorrow to her he had lately loved; this terrible *but*, which had such significance in the mouth of a woman like Montalais, was interrupted by a noise behind the wainscot, loud enough to be heard by the two speakers.

Montalais pricked up her ears, and Raoul had already risen, when a woman quietly entered through a secret door, which she closed behind her.

"Madame!" cried Raoul, recognizing the King's sister-in-law.

"Oh! how unfortunate I am," murmured Montalais, throwing herself — but too late — in front of the princess. "I mistook the hour!"

She was in time, however, to warn Madame, who was advancing towards Raoul.

"M. de Bragelonne, Madame," said she.

At these words the princess recoiled in her turn, and gave utterance to an exclamation.

"Your royal Highness," broke out Montalais, volubly, "has been kind enough to think of our lottery, then, and —"

The princess was beginning to lose countenance.

Raoul was in a hurry to get away. He did not guess the reason for such excitement, but felt that his presence was embarrassing.

Just as Madame was preparing a form of words that would give a commonplace turn to the situation, a closet, facing the alcove, opened, and De Guiche stepped out of it, his face radiant with joy. Although it must be said that the palest of the four was Raoul, the princess was near fainting and had to steady herself against the foot of the bed.

No one ventured to offer to support her. The scene took up a few minutes, during which the silence was terrible.

It was broken by Raoul, who went up to De Guiche and took his hand. The count was so prostrated that he trembled in every limb.

"My dear count," said Bragelonne, "tell Madame that I am too unfortunate not to deserve her forgiveness; tell her that I have loved during the course of my life, and that my horror at the treachery of which I have been the victim renders me relentless towards any treachery that happens to come under my notice. For that reason," he continued, looking at Montalais, with a smile, "I will never make public my friend's visits to you. But Madame has just now surprised you. Ask her pardon also. She is so noble and merciful that she is sure to grant it."

The despair of the princess was indescribable. In spite of the exquisite delicacy manifested by Raoul, it was repugnant to her nature to feel that she was at the mercy of an indiscretion.

It was equally repugnant to her to accept the loop-hole presented for her escape through the medium of this little deception. Agitated and nervous, she struggled against the stings of these two tortures.

Raoul understood her anxiety and came again to her aid. Bending his knee before her, he said, in a voice barely above a whisper:

"Madame, in two days I shall be far from Paris, and in a fortnight far from France, where I shall never be seen again."

"You are leaving us?" she asked, with ill-concealed joy.

"With M. de Beaufort."

"Going to Africa!" cried De Guiche. "Why, Raoul, that is the same as going to death!"

And forgetting everything, forgetting that this very forgetfulness spoke louder against the princess than even his presence:

"Ingrate!" cried he, "you never even spoke to me about it!" And he embraced him.

During this time Madame and Montalais had both vanished.

Raoul pressed his hand over his brow, and said, smiling: "I have been dreaming!" Then he continued earnestly to De Guiche, who gradually took up all his attention: "Dear friend, I have no concealments with you who are the chosen friend of my soul. I shall die in yon far-away country; your secret will expire with me before the year closes."

"Oh! Raoul! God forbid!"

"Do you know what my thoughts are, De Guiche? I believe that when I am sleeping beneath the earth, I shall live a fuller life than I have done during the past month. I am a Christian, my friend, and if such suffering were to last, I could not answer for the salvation of my soul."

De Guiche was proceeding to raise objections.

"Not a word as to myself," answered Raoul; "but a word of advice to you, dear friend; what I am about to say to you has far more importance than anything concerning myself."

"How can that be?"

"You run greater risks than I do, for you are loved."

"Oh —"

"It is to me so sweet a joy to be able to speak with you in confidence. Well, then, distrust Montalais, De Guiche!"

"She has always been a kind friend of mine."

"She was the friend of — her you know of. She ruined her through pride."

"You are mistaken."

"And now that she has ruined her, she is preparing to rob that woman of the only thing that renders her excusable in my eyes."

"What is it?"

"Her love."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that a plot has been hatched against the King's mistress, hatched in Madame's household, even."

"Can you believe this?"

"I am certain of it."

"By Montalais?"

"Well, you may consider her as the least dangerous of the enemies I dread for — her whom you know!"

"Be more explicit, my dear friend, and if I can understand you —"

"In two words: Madame has been jealous of the King."

"I am aware of that —"

"Oh, do not be alarmed. You are loved, De Guiche. Do you feel the full value of these three words? They mean that you can lift your head proudly, can sleep tranquilly, can thank God for every moment of your life! You are loved — they mean that you are ready to listen to everything, even to the advice of a friend who would help you to enjoy your happiness. You are loved, De Guiche, you are loved! You will not pass through those awful nights, those endless nights, traversed by those whose doom it is to die! You will live long if, like the miser, who patiently amasses his diamonds and gold, you husband your love bit by bit and crumb by crumb. You are loved! Permit me to tell you what you must do in order to be loved forever."

De Guiche stared at this unfortunate youth, who was mad with despair, and felt almost remorse at his own happiness.

Raoul recovered from his feverish excitement, and his next words were those of a composed and unimpassioned man.

"She whose name I should like to mention, but cannot, will be made to suffer," said he. "Swear to me that you will not only refuse to aid her persecutors, but that you will defend her with all your energy, as I would have defended her myself."

"I swear it!" replied De Guiche.

"And," continued Raoul, "some day when you have ren-

dered her a great service, some day when she has thanked you, promise to say these words to her : 'I have done you this good, madame, because you were commended to my care by M. de Bragelonne, to whom you have done so much evil.' "

"I swear it," murmured De Guiche, in tears.

"That is all. Farewell. To-morrow or the day after I start for Toulon. If you can spare me a few hours, give them to me."

"You shall have all my time!" cried the young man.

"Thank you."

"And what are you going to do now?"

"M. le Comte is at Planchet's and I hope to find M. d'Artagnan there also."

"M. d'Artagnan?"

"I wish to embrace him before my departure. He is an honorable gentleman and loves me. Adieu, dear friend; you are doubtless expected. You will find me, when you like, at the count's lodgings."

The two young men embraced. Any one who had seen them at the time would not have failed to point to Raoul and say while doing so:

"That is the happy man!"

CHAPTER LVI.

PLANCHET'S INVENTORY.

ATHOS had, in fact, during Raoul's visit to the Luxembourg, gone to Planchet's for the purpose of making inquiries as to D'Artagnan. When he reached the Rue des Lombards, he found the grocer's shop in a state of great confusion; but this confusion was not due to a successful sale or the arrival of merchandise.

Planchet was not in his usual place, throned on one of his sacks or barrels. No. A clerk, with a pen behind his ear, and another with a note-book in his hand, were setting down a number of figures, while a third was counting and weighing.

An inventory was being taken. Athos, not being a mer-

chant, felt somewhat embarrassed by all these material obstacles as well as by the majestic demeanor of those who handled them. He saw several customers sent away, and he was wondering whether he, not having come to purchase anything, might not be considered a still more unwelcome intruder. So he inquired, in a tone of great politeness, if he might not speak with M. Planchet. He was told, carelessly, that M. Planchet was packing his trunks.

These words aroused the count's curiosity.

"Packing his trunks!" he repeated. "Is M. Planchet going away?"

"Yes, monsieur, immediately."

"Then, gentlemen, do me the favor to announce to M. Planchet that the Comte de la Fère would speak with him for a moment or so."

Thereupon, one of the young men, who doubtless had been accustomed to hear this name mentioned very respectfully, started to comply with the count's request.

At this very moment Raoul entered Planchet's after the conclusion of his painful scene with Montalais and De Guiche.

When Planchet received the message brought him by his clerk, he abandoned his task on the spot, and hastened to meet Athos.

"Ah, M. le Comte," said he, "how glad I am to see you! What lucky star has brought you hither?"

"My dear Planchet," answered the count, pressing his son's hand and with a side look at his dejected features, "we have come to inquire — but in what a state of confusion I find you! You are as white as a miller; what have you been doing to yourself?"

"For goodness' sake, monsieur, do not come near me until I have given myself a good shaking."

"Oh, nonsense! What harm can flour or dust do except whiten me?"

"No, no. It is not dust I have on me, but arsenic."

"Arsenic?"

"Yes, I have been laying in a supply for the rats."

"Oh, no doubt in such an establishment as yours rats play a considerable part."

"But I have not much to do with this establishment now, M. le Comte. The rats have robbed me of more in it than they can ever do again."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you must have noticed, monsieur, that an inventory is being taken."

"So you are giving up business?"

"Yes, monsieur, I am parting with it to one of my clerks."

"Oho! you are rich enough to do so, then?"

"Monsieur, I have become disgusted with the city. Perhaps it is that I am getting old, and, as M. d'Artagnan once said, when you begin to get old, you begin to think of the things you liked when you were young. At all events, I have for some time been very fond of country life and gardening; I have been a peasant in my time."

The little laugh wherewith Planchet punctuated this confession was rather pretentious for a man who boasted of his humility.

Athos made a gesture of approval.

"Are you going to buy an estate?" he asked.

"I have bought one, monsieur."

"Ah, so much the better."

"A little house at Fontainebleau, with some twenty acres around it."

"Excellent, Planchet! I congratulate you."

"But, monsieur, we are not at all comfortable here. This abominable dust is making you cough. *Corbleu!* I should not like to poison the worthiest gentleman in the whole kingdom."

Athos did not smile at this little joke, which, indeed, Planchet had let fly at him as a sort of experiment on his part in fashionable jocularly.

"Yes," he answered, "let us have a talk in private; in your own apartment, for instance. You have one, have you not?"

"Certainly, M. le Comte."

"Upstairs, I presume?"

And Athos, seeing that Planchet was embarrassed, thought he would relieve him by going first.

"The fact is —" stammered Planchet.

Athos misunderstood his hesitation. He fancied the grocer feared that the hospitality it was in his power to offer was but of a very indifferent character.

"Never mind," said he. "No one expects the dwelling of a tradesman in this quarter to be a palace. Come along."

Raoul sprang past the count and entered the room. Two cries were heard simultaneously, or rather three. One of those cries rose above the two others. It was the shriek of a woman. The second cry issued from the lips of Raoul. It was a simple exclamation. As soon as it was uttered, he quickly shut the door. The third cry was due to terror. It came from Planchet.

"Pardon me," the latter added, "but madame is dressing."

Raoul no doubt would have confirmed the truth of Planchet's assertion, for he was proceeding to step downstairs again.

"Madame?" inquired Athos. "Ah, excuse me, my good fellow, I was not aware that you had —"

"Trüchen," said Planchet, growing red.

"Or any one else. Pardon us for being so indiscreet."

"No, no. You may enter now. Please do so, gentlemen."

"We will do nothing of the sort," said Athos.

"Oh, madame has been notified, and has had time —"

"No, Planchet. Adieu."

"Oh! gentleman, you will not humiliate me by remaining on the stairs, and then leaving without ever having sat down?"

"Had we known you had a lady in your apartments," said Athos, with his usual composure, "we should have requested to be allowed to pay her our respects."

Planchet was so utterly disconcerted by this contumelious urbanity that he passed by them and opened the door himself, thus, as it were, forcing the count and his son to enter.

Trüchen was now arrayed in all her bravery; she was garbed in the rich and coquettish costume of a wealthy tradesman's wife, and those German eyes of hers met the French eyes before her fearlessly. After making a couple of courtesies, she went down to the shop.

But before doing so, she was careful to listen at the door, eager to hear what these noble visitors might have to say of her. Athos suspected as much, and gave the conversation a different direction.

Planchet was burning to make the explanation to Athos which the latter was determined to avoid.

But since the obstinacy of one man will often outweary that

of another, Athos was at last compelled to listen to the narrative of Planchet's idyllic bliss, delivered, however, in language that was somewhat chaster than that of Longus. So the grocer told him how Trüchen had charmed him in his prime, and had brought good luck to his business, as Ruth had done to Boaz.

"All you want now is an heir to your prosperity," said Athos.

"If I had one, he would have three hundred thousand livres," answered Planchet.

"You should try to get one, then," observed Athos, phlegmatically, "if only to preserve your little fortune."

The words "little fortune" at once set Planchet in his proper place, just as the sergeant's voice used to do when he was a private in the Piedmont regiment.

Athos perceived that Planchet would espouse Trüchen, and that, despite the fates, he was sure to have an heir. He was the more convinced of this when he learned that the clerk to whom Planchet had sold his business was Trüchen's cousin. Athos remembered that this young fellow had kinky hair, square shoulders, and the complexion of a gilly-flower.

He knew now all that was necessary as to the destiny of the grocer. The fine dresses of Trüchen would hardly compensate her for a monotonous life spent in gardening and other rural occupations with a graybeard husband.

Athos, as we have said, understood all this. Then, with some abruptness, he passed on to another question:

"What is M. d'Artagnan doing?" said he. "We did not find him at the Louvre."

"Ah! M. le Comte, M. d'Artagnan has disappeared."

"Disappeared?" repeated Athos, in amazement.

"Oh, monsieur, we know what that means."

"No, certainly; at least, I don't."

"When M. d'Artagnan disappears, it is because he is employed on a mission or some other important affair."

"Has he spoken to you about it?"

"Never."

"Yet you knew formerly of his departure for England?"

"On account of the speculation," said Planchet, thoughtlessly.

"The speculation?"

"I mean —" interrupted Planchet, confused.

"Well, neither your affairs nor your master's are in question. The interest I take in my friend has alone led me to ask you for information. Since the captain of the musketeers is not here, and since you cannot tell us where we are likely to meet M. d'Artagnan, we will bid you good-bye. Come, Raoul. *Au revoir, Planchet, au revoir!*"

"M. le Comte, I wish I could tell you —"

"Oh, by no means; I am the last person to reproach a servant for being cautious."

The word "servant" jarred upon the demi-millionaire somewhat; but his good-nature and his respect for his visitor got the better of his pride.

"I do not show any lack of caution, monsieur, if I inform you that M. d'Artagnan was here the other day."

"Ah!"

"And spent several hours over a map."

"You were right, my friend; do not tell me any more."

"And I have the map here to prove what I say," continued Planchet, going to fetch it from the wall on which it hung suspended by a cord that formed a triangle with the bar of the window to which it was fastened. It was the plan consulted by D'Artagnan on his last visit to Planchet.

When the grocer brought the sheet to the Comte de la Fère, it proved to be a map of France, and the trained eye of Athos discovered an itinerary marked out with small pins. Wherever a pin was missing, a hole showed that it had been there. By following the lines of the pins and holes Athos perceived that D'Artagnan must have gone south as far as the Mediterranean, and evidently in the direction of Toulon. The marks and the punctured spots stopped near Cannes.

The count racked his brains for a few moments trying to find out what the musketeer could be doing at Cannes and why he should be inspecting the banks of the Var.

But all his reflections came to naught. His usual clear-sightedness had deserted him, and Raoul was as much at a loss as he was.

"Never mind," said the young man to the count, who had been silently pointing out to him D'Artagnan's route, "we are bound to acknowledge that Providence has always connected our destiny with that of M. d'Artagnan. You see he is somewhere near Cannes, and you intend going with me as far as

Toulon at least, monsieur. We are likely to find him more easily on the road than on this map."

Then, after taking leave of Planchet, who was engaged in scolding his clerks, — and even his successor, Trüchen's cousin, — the two gentlemen set out to visit the Duc de Beaufort.

Just outside the grocer's shop, they saw a chariot, the future depository of Mademoiselle Trüchen's charms and M. Planchet's bags of crowns.

"Every one travels towards happiness by the road he has himself selected," murmured Raoul, sadly.

"The road to Fontainebleau!" shouted Planchet to his coachman.

CHAPTER LVII.

M. DE BEAUFORT'S INVENTORY.

THIS conversation about D'Artagnan with Planchet, this visit to Planchet just as he was about to retire from Paris and bury himself in the country, was, on the part of Athos and his son, a sort of farewell to the capital and to their life of other days.

And, in fact, what were these two men leaving behind them — one of whom had reaped all the glory belonging to the past, the other all the misery belonging to the present? Clearly neither of them had anything to ask of his contemporaries. All they had to do, therefore, was to pay their visit to M. de Beaufort and arrange the details incident to their departure.

The duke was lodged magnificently in Paris. He lived in the splendid style only possible to men enjoying the great fortunes a few graybeards remembered witnessing during the extravagant profusion of Henri III.'s reign. At that period certain noblemen of high station were richer than the king. They were well aware of the fact, and did not scruple to use their wealth in such a way as to humiliate somewhat his royal Majesty. It was this selfish aristocracy which Richelieu had forced to contribute with its blood, its money, and its proud subjection to what was henceforth to be called the service of the king.

From Louis XI. — that terrible mower-down of the great —

to Richelieu, how many families had raised their heads! How many, from Richelieu to Louis XIV., had bent their heads never to raise them again! But M. de Beaufort had been born a prince, and his blood was of the sort that is not shed on scaffolds — except by the decree of a people.

This prince, then, was accustomed to live in a grand style. But how did he manage to pay for his horses, his trains of servants, his table? No one could tell, and he himself less than any one. All that could be said was that the sons of a king had certain privileges at that particular period, and every one was willing to become one of their creditors, either from respect, devotion, or a persuasion that he should be paid some time or other.

Athos and Raoul found the mansion of the prince in quite as much confusion as they had found the shop of Planchet. The duke also was taking his inventory; in other words, he was distributing among his creditors — all of them his friends — every household article that had any considerable value.

Since he owed nearly two millions — an enormous sum at the time — M. de Beaufort had come to the conclusion that he must see his way to the acquisition of a good round sum before starting for Africa; and the best plan to get it, he calculated, was to give rather than to sell his plate, arms, jewels, and furniture to his creditors; this would insure a double return.

For how can a man to whom you owe ten thousand livres refuse to take from you an article worth six thousand as a present, when that article is enhanced in value by having belonged to a descendant of Henri IV.? and how can the same man, after taking it from you, refuse another ten thousand livres to such a generous lord?

This was the very thing that happened. The prince no longer possessed a house. What is the use of a house to an admiral whose suite of apartments is on board his ship? He owned no more arms: they were superfluous, since his place was among his cannon; no more jewels: the sea might devour them; but he had three or four hundred thousand crowns in his money-chest.

And through every quarter of his mansion creditors were rambling merrily, really believing that they were pillaging monseigneur.

The prince had, in a supreme degree, the art of rendering happy such of his creditors as were most to be pitied. Every man in a tight place, every man with an empty purse, met in him a patient and intelligent sympathizer with his position.

To some he said :

“ Oh ! if I only had what you have, I would give it to you.”

To others :

“ All I have is this silver ewer : it is worth five hundred livres at least ; take it.”

Which was done as soon as said ; and such a valuable current coin is a courteous demeanor that the prince was always able to renew his credit. On the present occasion he did not use any ceremony at all ; he gave up everything ; it really did look like a general pillage.

The Eastern story of the poor Arab who carried away from the sack of a palace a pot in which he had hidden a bag of gold, and was allowed to pass free and unenvied through the crowd, had here its counterpart. Quite a number of tradesmen hid away a number of articles they considered of great value, which they had found in the servants' halls. The grocers devoted themselves to the task of plundering the clothes-presses and harness-rooms, and set no store by what the tailors and saddlers esteemed very precious. They were very eager to carry home to their wives the preserves given by monseigneur, and they might be seen bounding joyously along under the weight of jars and bottles proudly stamped with the De Beaufort arms.

After distributing his horses and the hay in his lofts, the prince made thirty people happy with his kitchen utensils, and three hundred with the contents of his cellars. Moreover, all these folk departed with the firm conviction that M. de Beaufort had acted in this manner because he was absolutely certain of finding a new fortune under the tents of the Arabs.

While the sacking of his hôtel was proceeding, it was again and again repeated that he had been sent by the King to Djidgelli solely with the view of winning riches to make up for the wealth he had squandered ; that the treasures of Africa were to be divided equally between him and Louis ; and that the said treasures consisted of mines of diamonds and other precious stones. As for the gold and silver mines of Mount Atlas, no one thought it worth while mentioning them.

And then, besides the mines, which could not be very well worked until after the campaign, there was the booty which was sure to be made by the army. Why, M. de Beaufort was going to lay his hands on all the riches the sea-rovers had been stealing from Christendom ever since the battle of Lepanto! The number of millions to be recovered was past reckoning. Now, why should one be sparing of the poor little articles belonging to his past life who was going in quest of untold treasures?

And, reciprocally, why set any store by the property of one who set such little store by it himself?

Such was the situation. A glance was sufficient to disclose it to the penetrating eye of Athos.

He found the admiral of France just a little bit flustered, for he was about to rise from a table of fifty covers, and there had been deep drinking to the success of the expedition. After dessert, the remains of the victuals had been abandoned to the lackeys, and the empty plates to those who had a fancy for them. His ruin and his popularity had both contributed to the prince's intoxication. He had been drinking his wine of the past to the health of his wine of the future.

When he saw Athos and Raoul:

"Aha!" cried he; "so you have brought me my aide-de-camp. This way, count; this way, viscount."

Athos was trying to make his way through a pile of linen and plate.

"Oh, step over it," said the duke.

And he offered a bumper to Athos.

The count accepted it. Raoul hardly wet his lips.

"Here is your commission," said the prince to Raoul. "I was so sure of you that I had it made out before. You will go in advance of me to Antibes."

"Very well, monseigneur."

"There is the order."

And he gave the order to Bragelonne.

"Do you know anything about the sea?" said he.

"Yes, monseigneur, I have sailed with M. le Prince."

"Good. A number of tenders and lighters must be in attendance to escort me and carry my supplies. The army must be ready to embark in a fortnight at the latest."

"That shall be done, monseigneur."

"The present order gives you the right to visit and search

all the islands along the coast. You will carry off and enroll all the men needed."

"Yes, M. le Duc."

"And since you are active and have a good deal of work before you, you'll have to spend a large amount of money."

"I hope not, monseigneur."

"I hope the contrary. My intendant has prepared orders for a thousand livres each to be levied on the towns in the south. You will have a hundred of them. You can now go, my dear viscount."

Athos interrupted the prince. "Keep your money, monseigneur; you will require gold as well as lead for your war on the Arabs."

"I'll try to prove the contrary," rejoined the duke; "and besides, you know my ideas regarding this expedition: plenty of noise, plenty of fire, and myself disappearing, if need be, in the smoke."

After these words the duke burst out laughing. But perceiving that Athos and Raoul were not at all inclined to keep him in countenance:

"Ah!" said he, with the courtly egotism of his name and rank, "you are the kind of persons one had better not meet after dinner; you are cold, stiff, and dry, when I am all fire, all wine, all activity. Devil take me if I ever care to see you, viscount, except when I am fasting; and as for you, count, if you keep up that style of face, I won't see you at all!"

While speaking, he pressed the hand of Athos, who answered with a smile:

"Monseigneur, do not get so excited because you happen to have money. I foretell that, before a month, it is you who shall be dry, stiff, and cold in presence of your empty money-chest; and then what will be your astonishment to see Raoul gay, fiery, and high-spirited, and all because he will have a certain number of bright new crowns to offer you!"

"God grant it!" cried the delighted duke. "You'll stay with me, count?"

"No, I am going with Raoul. The mission you have given him is a difficult and laborious one. He would find it almost impossible to accomplish by himself. You do not seem to be aware, monseigneur, that the office you have entrusted him with is of the very first class."

"Pshaw!"

"And in the navy, too!"

"Oh, a lad like him can do whatever he likes anywhere."

"Monseigneur, you will find nowhere so much zeal, intelligence, and genuine courage as you will find in Raoul. But if your embarkation should turn out a failure under his direction, you would only meet what you deserve."

"So you are scolding me now!"

"Monseigneur, it would take an admiral a full year to provision a fleet, collect a flotilla, and recruit men for the service, and Raoul has just a fortnight to do it in."

"I tell you he'll manage it somehow or other."

"I agree with you there; but I shall help him."

"I have relied on you to do so; and further, when he gets to Toulon, I am in hopes you will not let him go alone."

"Oh!" said Athos, shaking his head.

"Patience! patience!"

"Monseigneur, permit us to bid you good-bye."

"Go, then, and may my good fortune wait upon you!"

"Adieu, monseigneur, and may your usual good fortune wait upon you also!"

"The expedition has begun nicely," said Athos to his son. "No supplies, no reserves, no storage vessels; what can any one do in such a case?"

"Well," murmured Raoul, "if every one does as I intend doing in Africa, there will be no lack of supplies."

"Monsieur," replied Athos, sternly, "let not your selfishness, or what you are pleased to call your grief, render you unjust or mad. If you started on this expedition with the intention of seeking death, then you did not need the help of any one, and there was no reason why you should have sought that of M. de Beaufort. But so soon as you approached the officer in command, so soon as you accepted a post in his navy with all its responsibilities, the matter no longer concerned you, it concerned the poor soldiers who have a soul and body as well as you, who will look back tearfully on their native land and will suffer all the hardships incidental to humanity in such circumstances. Learn, Raoul, that the ministry of an officer is as useful as that of a priest, and that he is bound to have more charity than a priest."

"Monsieur, I know it, and have practised it. I would have done so still, but —"

"You forget, too, that you belong to a country proud of her military glory. Die, if you will, but do not die without honor and profit to France. Come, Raoul, let not my words grieve you. I love you, and would have you perfect."

"And I love your reproaches, monsieur," answered Raoul, softly. "There is healing in them, for they prove that some one loves me still."

"And now let us start, Raoul; the weather is beautiful and the sky is pure. A still purer sky will shine above you at Djidgelli; it will speak to you of me there, as it speaks to me of God here."

The two gentlemen then discussed the wild fancies of the duke, agreeing that France was likely to be very imperfectly served by him in this expedition; and having summed up his entire policy in the word "vanity," they proceeded on their way, in obedience to their will rather than to their destiny. The sacrifice was accomplished.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE SILVER DISH.

THE journey was in itself a pleasant one. Athos and his son travelled at the rate of fifteen leagues a day, though sometimes they rode faster, when the grief of Raoul increased in intensity. It took them a fortnight to reach Toulon; at Antibes they lost every trace of D'Artagnan.

Evidently the captain of the musketeers must have travelled incognito in this region, for Athos was informed that a cavalier like the one he had described had exchanged his horse for a close carriage on leaving Avignon.

Raoul was in utter despair at the prospect of not meeting D'Artagnan. His tender heart longed to bid adieu to that heart of steel, and derive consolation from it.

Athos knew from experience that D'Artagnan became impenetrable when engaged in any serious enterprise, either on his own account or in the service of the King.

He was even afraid of offending his friend or injuring him by too many inquiries. However, when Raoul had set to work sorting out vessels for the flotilla and collecting the lighters

and tenders he was to send to Toulon, one of the fishermen informed the count that his boat was laid up for repairs ever since a trip he had made with a gentleman who had been in a great hurry to embark.

Athos believed the fellow to be lying, for he would earn more money at fishing if he were left at home when all his comrades were away. He insisted, therefore, upon having the details.

The fisherman informed him that, about six days before, a man came to hire his boat during the night for a trip to the Isle of Saint-Honorat. His terms were agreed to. But when the gentleman arrived he had with him a huge carriage chest and wanted to embark it, although it was almost impossible to do so. The fisherman tried to draw out of the bargain. But all his protests and threats got for him was a shower of blows from the gentleman, who beat him black and blue with his cane. The fisherman, in a towering rage, had recourse to the syndic of his guild at Antibes, the members of which administer justice among themselves and protect one another. Thereupon the gentleman exhibited a certain paper, and at the sight of it the syndic bowed to the very ground, ordered the fisherman to obey, and scolded him for not having done so before. Then they started with the freight on board.

"But all this does not tell me," interrupted Athos, "how it was that you ran aground."

"I'm going to do so. I steered for Saint-Honorat, in obedience to the gentleman's orders; but he changed his mind and insisted that I could not possibly pass to the south of the abbey."

"Why not?"

"Because, monsieur, there is, south of the square tower of the Benedictines and facing it, a bank called *Les Moines*."

"A reef?"

"On a level with the water as well as under it; a dangerous passage, but which I have cleared a thousand times. The gentleman ordered me to land him at Sainte-Marguerite."

"Well?"

"Well, monsieur," cried the fisherman, in his strong Provençal accent, "a fellow is a sailor or he is n't. He knows his course, or he is nothing but a lubber. I stuck to my opinion. The gentleman caught me by the throat and threatened to strangle me. My comrade seized a hatchet; I did the same.

We had n't forgotten his insults of the night before and we thought we'd pay him off for them. But he made such lively play with his sword that we did not know where to have him. I was going to fling my hatchet at his head, and had a right to do so, monsieur, had n't I? A sailor is as much master on his own deck as a citizen is in his own chamber. I was going, then, to defend myself, and cut my fine gentleman in two, when suddenly — you may believe me or not, as you like, monsieur — that big box opened of itself, I can't tell how, and out of it came a sort of ghost in a black helmet and a black mask, a frightful object, and it threatened us with its fist."

"It was?" asked Athos.

"The devil, monsieur! for the gentleman cried out joyfully: 'Ah! thanks, monseigneur!'"

"It is strange!" murmured the count, with a glance at Raoul.

"What did you do next?" inquired the latter.

"Why, as it was, two poor fellows like us were anything but a match for two gentlemen; but a match for the devil —! Oh, my comrade and I never said a single word to each other, but made one jump into the sea. Luckily, we were within seven or eight hundred feet of shore."

"And then?"

"And then, monsieur, a breeze sprang up from the southwest, and the boat veered round and grounded on the sands of Sainte-Marguerite."

"Yes. But the two travellers?"

"Bah! don't be put out about them. We soon had a proof that one of them was the devil and protected the other fellow; for when we swam out to the boat, expecting to find these two creatures killed or stunned by the shock, we found nothing, not even the carriage."

"Strange! strange!" repeated the count. "And what did you do next, my friend?"

"Complained to the governor of Sainte-Marguerite, who shook his fist in my face and told me if I repeated such silly stories he would have me flogged for my pains."

"The governor said so?"

"Ay, that he did, monsieur; and yet my boat was broken, regularly smashed, monsieur, for the prow of it is yonder on Sainte-Marguerite's point, and the carpenter has asked a hundred and twenty francs for repairing it."

"Very well," said Raoul, "you will be exempted from service. You may go."

"Should you care to take a trip to Sainte-Marguerite?" inquired Athos.

"Yes, monsieur; there is something to be cleared up about this matter. That fellow does not impress me as having told the truth."

"Nor me either, Raoul. I should not wonder if the tale of the masked man and the vanished carriage was invented to hide the violence which this rustic may have offered to his passenger in the open sea, as a punishment for his obstinacy in insisting on embarking."

"I have suspected as much; and the carriage was more likely to contain valuables than a man."

"We'll see to that, Raoul. The gentleman described certainly bears a close resemblance to D'Artagnan. That is the way in which he would be sure to act. Alas! we are no longer the young invincibles of other days! Who knows but that the hatchet or iron bar of this wretched fisherman may have succeeded in doing what balls and bullets and the finest swords in Europe have not been able to do in forty years!"

On the same day they embarked for Sainte-Marguerite on a *chasse-marée*, which had come from Toulon under orders.

The impression they felt on drawing near their destination was very singular. The island was fairly covered with fruit and flowers; the part which was cultivated being used as a garden by the governor. Oranges, pomegranates, and fig-trees were bending under the weight of their gold and purple burdens. The red partridges were running in coveys through the brambles and junipers in the uncultivated places around the garden; and at every step taken by Raoul and the count a frightened rabbit scuttled away through the sweet marjoram and broom into his burrow.

In fact, this blessed island might be said to be uninhabited. It was flat and level, and had but a single little creek for the convenience of the boats that came there. Smugglers were allowed to use it as a temporary warehouse under the protection of the governor, who divided their gains with them, but only on condition that they did not kill the game or plunder his garden. Having made this arrangement, the governor was satisfied with eight soldiers as a garrison for his

fortress, in which a dozen cannon were slowly rusting. So this particular governor was a lucky husbandman, harvesting his wine, oil, figs, and oranges, and soaking his limes and lemons in the sunlight that shone on his casements.

The fortress, encircled by a deep fosse, its sole defence, lifted to the heavens its three heads, or rather its three turrets, which were connected by moss-clad terraces.

Athos and Raoul wandered for a time round the garden fences, vainly looking for some one who might usher them into the governor's presence. At last they stepped into the garden. It was at the hottest hour of the day, the hour when every living thing runs to hide under the herbage or under the stones; the hour when a veil of fire extends over nature as if to stifle every sound, to envelop all existence; the hour when the partridges sleep under the heath, the flies under the leaves, and the waves under the sky.

Athos saw no one on the terrace, between the second and third turret, except a soldier who carried a basket of provisions on his head. This man soon returned without the basket, and speedily vanished in the depths of his sentry-box.

Athos concluded he must have been carrying his dinner to some one, and, having done so, had come back to his own. Suddenly he heard a cry, and, on raising his head, perceived in the frame of the bars of a window something white, something like a hand waving, something dazzling, too, like a weapon reflecting the sunlight.

And before he could form a clear notion of what he had just seen, a luminous trail, accompanied by a whizzing sound, brought back his attention from the donjon to the ground. Then a second dull sound came to his ears from the fosse, and Raoul ran and picked up a silver dish which had just rolled down to the dry sand. The hand which had hurled this dish made a sign to the two gentlemen, and then disappeared.

Raoul and Athos drew near each other and earnestly examined the dish, which was soiled with dust. They discovered at the bottom of it certain characters that had been traced with the point of a knife.

"*I am,*" said the inscription, "*the brother of the King of France, a prisoner to-day, a madman to-morrow. French gentlemen and Christians, pray to God for the soul and for the reason of the son of your masters!*"

The dish fell from the hands of Athos, while Raoul was meditating on the significance of these dismal words.

At the same instant there was a shout from the top of the donjon. Raoul, quick as lightning, bent his head and forced down that of his father also. The barrel of a musket had just gleamed above the crest of the parapet. A white smoke spurted like a plume from the musket's mouth, and a ball was flattened against a rock within six inches of the two gentlemen. Another musket then made its appearance and was pointed at them.

"*Cordieux!*" shouted Athos, "are you assassins, then? Come down, cowards, and show yourselves!"

The man who was about to fire the musket answered these exclamations with a cry of surprise, and when his companion, determined to continue the attack, seized the loaded weapon, the man who had uttered the cry struck it up, and the shot passed through the air harmlessly.

On seeing these two men disappear from the platform, Athos and Raoul imagined they were coming to fall upon them, and they awaited the assault firmly.

Before five minutes had slipped by, a drum was beat which summoned the eight soldiers of the garrison, who presently appeared, with their muskets, on the other side of the fosse. At their head was an officer whom Athos and Raoul recognized as the man who had fired the first musket. This man ordered the soldiers to "make ready."

"They're going to shoot us!" cried Raoul. "Let us draw our swords, at least, and jump over the fosse. We shall kill two of these villains when their muskets are empty."

And Raoul, suiting the action to the word, was springing forward, followed by Athos, when a well-known voice echoed behind them.

"Athos! Raoul!" it cried.

"D'Artagnan!" answered the two gentlemen.

"Recover arms, *mordious!*" shouted the captain to the soldiers. "I knew very well what I was talking about a moment ago!"

The soldiers obeyed.

"But what is the meaning of all this?" inquired Athos. "Are people shot here without notice?"

"Yes, I was going to fire at you, and, though the governor might have missed you, I should not have done so, my dear

friends. How lucky it is that I have contracted the habit of taking a long aim, instead of firing instinctively when I do take aim! And then I fancied I recognized you. Ah! my friends, what a piece of good fortune that was!"

And D'Artagnan brushed the perspiration from his forehead, for he had run fast, and his agitation was anything but feigned.

"What! was the person who fired on us the governor of the fortress?"

"The very man."

"And why did he do so? What have we done to him?"

"*Pardieu!* you picked up what the prisoner threw to you."

"We did."

"That dish — the prisoner wrote something on the bottom of it, did he not?"

"Yes."

"I suspected as much. Oh, God!"

And D'Artagnan, with all the marks of the most intense anxiety, took the dish and read the inscription. When he had finished, his face turned livid.

"Oh, God!" he repeated. "Hush! the governor is approaching!"

"Well, and what then? What have we done?" said Raoul.

"So it is true?" whispered Athos; "it is true?"

"Hush! I tell you, hush! If it is known that you can read, if it is suspected that you have understood, — you know how I love you, — my dear friends, you know I would lay down my life for you — but —"

"But —" said Athos and Raoul.

"I might save you from death, but I could not save you from eternal imprisonment. Silence, then; not a word!"

The governor came up, having crossed the fosse on a plank bridge.

"Well," he called to D'Artagnan, "why this delay?"

"You are Spaniards, you do not know a word of French," the captain whispered hurriedly to his friends. "Well," he answered, aloud, addressing the governor, "I was right. These gentlemen are Spanish officers whose acquaintance I made last year at Ypres. They don't know a word of French."

"Indeed!" said the governor, examining them suspiciously.

Then he tried to read the inscription on the dish.

D'Artagnan tore it out of his hands and effaced the characters with the point of his sword.

"What are you doing there?" cried the governor. "So you will not allow me to read it?"

"It is a state secret," answered D'Artagnan, bluntly, "and you know that, by the King's order, the penalty of death awaits any one who discovers it. If you like, then, I'll let you read it, and have you shot immediately afterward."

The tone in which he uttered this address was partly serious and partly ironical. Meanwhile, Athos and Raoul observed the most indifferent and unconcerned silence.

"But surely," said the governor, "these gentlemen must have understood at least some of the words."

"Oh, nonsense! even if they understood words they heard, they never would understand words that are written. They could not read them, even if they were written in Spanish. Remember that it is a fault in a noble Spaniard to know how to read."

The governor had to be contented with this explanation, but he was persistent.

"Invite these gentlemen to enter the fort," said he.

"With pleasure; I was about to propose doing so myself," answered D'Artagnan.

The fact is, the captain was not about to propose anything of the kind, and was wishing his friends a hundred leagues away. But he had to put the best face on the matter he could. He addressed an invitation to the two gentlemen in Spanish, which they accepted.

The party thereupon proceeded towards the entrance to the fort, and, the incident having been explained, the eight soldiers returned to the pleasant idleness which had for a moment been disturbed by this unheard-of adventure.

CHAPTER LIX.

CAPTIVE AND JAILERS.

ONCE in the fort, and while the governor was making some preparations for the reception of his guests, Athos said to D'Artagnan:

"Come, now, let us have an explanation while we are alone."

"The explanation is simple enough," answered the muske-

teer. "I have conducted to the island a prisoner whom the King does not allow to be seen. You came hither, and he threw something to you out of the window. I was dining with the governor, saw the object, and saw Raoul pick it up. It does not take me long to understand what is going on before my eyes. I understood, and I believed there was some collusion between you and the prisoner. Thereupon —"

"You ordered us to be shot."

"*Ma foi!* I confess it. But if I was the first to seize a musket, luckily I was the last to aim at you."

"If you had killed me, D'Artagnan, I should have had the good fortune to die for the royal house of France and by the hand of its noblest and most loyal defender."

"Upon my word! What rubbish is this you're talking about 'the royal house'?" stammered D'Artagnan. "What! a man of your wisdom and common sense to believe the nonsense written by a lunatic!"

"Yes, I believe it."

"And the fact, my dear chevalier, that you have been ordered to kill those who believe it is a very strong reason for our belief," added Raoul.

"Evidently, D'Artagnan," continued Athos, in an undertone, "the King does not want the secret of his family to be bruited abroad and cover with infamy the executioners of the son of Louis XIII."

"Oh, come, now, Athos, get rid of these childish fancies, or I must cease to regard you as a sober-minded person. Will you have the goodness to explain to me how Louis XIII. could have a son at Sainte-Marguerite?"

"A son you brought here, masked, in a fisherman's boat, — why not?"

D'Artagnan paused.

"Ah!" said he, "pray where did you learn that a fisherman's boat —"

"Brought you to Sainte-Marguerite with the carriage containing the prisoner, the prisoner you called 'monseigneur'?" Oh, I learned it, anyway," retorted the count.

D'Artagnan bit his mustache.

"Even if it were true," he answered, "that I brought here a masked man in a carriage, nothing proves that that man was a prince — a prince of the house of France."

"You had better ask Aramis," replied Athos, coolly.

"Aramis!" exclaimed the musketeer, quite dumfounded.
"You have seen Aramis?"

"After his misadventure at Vaux, yes; I saw him at a time when he was a fugitive, an outcast, a ruined man, and he told me enough to lead me to believe in the truth of the complaints engraved by that hapless youth on the bottom of the silver dish."

D'Artagnan dropped his head on his breast, in a state of utter dejection.

"And it is thus," said he, "that God mocks at what men are pleased to call their wisdom! A fine secret, truly, is that of which a dozen or fifteen men hold all the fragments! Athos, cursed be the chance which has brought us face to face in this affair, for now —"

"Well," replied Athos, with his usual gentle gravity, "is your secret lost because I am acquainted with it? Have I never borne a weight as heavy during my life? Have you lost your memory, my dear fellow?"

"You have never borne a secret so perilous," rejoined D'Artagnan, sadly. "I have a kind of sinister feeling that every one connected with this secret will die, and die miserably."

"God's will be done, D'Artagnan! But here comes your governor."

D'Artagnan and his friends again took up their parts.

This governor, a harsh and distrustful man, was more than polite, was obsequious to D'Artagnan. He contented himself with offering hospitality to the travellers, and keeping a vigilant eye on them at the same time.

Athos and Raoul noticed that he often tried to embarrass them by sudden attacks, or to catch them off their guard; but he did not succeed in disconcerting either of them. He had to confess to himself that what D'Artagnan told him was probable enough, though he was by no means inclined to believe that it was exactly true.

They rose from table, and retired to seek some repose.

"What is that man's name? I do not like his looks," said Athos to D'Artagnan, in Spanish.

"De Saint-Mars," replied the captain.

"Is he to be the young prince's jailer?"

"Eh? how can I tell? For all I know, I may be kept here myself forever."

"Oh, you're not serious. You?"

"My dear friend, I am in the position of a man who has found a treasure in the middle of a desert. He'd like to carry it off, but cannot; he'd like to leave it, but dare not. The King will not order me to return, for he is afraid that no one else could be such a vigilant warder as I am; he is sorry he cannot have me near him, for he is well aware that no one else can be such a useful servant near him as I am. But let happen what may, nothing will happen except by the will of God."

"Still," observed Raoul, "the very fact that you know nothing for certain proves that your stay here will be temporary, and that you will return to Paris."

"Pray ask these gentlemen," interrupted Saint-Mars, "why they visited Sainte-Marguerite."

"Because there is, they were informed, a Benedictine monastery at Saint-Honorat well worth seeing, and because they heard the shooting in Sainte-Marguerite was very fine."

"It is at their service," answered Saint-Mars, "as well as at yours."

D'Artagnan thanked him.

"When do they leave?" added the governor.

"To-morrow," replied D'Artagnan.

M. de Saint-Mars went to make his rounds, and left the musketeer alone with the two pretended Spaniards.

"Ah!" cried D'Artagnan, "my present life and companionship does not suit me at all. I have this man under me, but he bores me to death, *mordieux!* Hold! what if we were to have a shot at the rabbits? The walk will be beautiful and won't tire you. The island is only four and a half miles long and one and a half wide, a regular park, in fact. Come, let us find some amusement."

"We'll go wherever you like, D'Artagnan, not in quest of amusement, but to talk freely."

D'Artagnan made a sign to a soldier, who understood what was wanted, brought the gentlemen fowling-pieces, and returned to the fort.

"And now," inquired the musketeer, "would you be pleased to answer the question put to you by that gloomy-looking fellow Saint-Mars? Why have you visited Sainte-Marguerite?"

"To bid you farewell."

"To bid me farewell? What do you mean? Is Raoul going anywhere?"

"Yes."

"With M. de Beaufort?"

"With M. de Beaufort. You can guess at everything, my dear friend."

"Oh, mere habit."

While the two friends were conversing, Raoul had sat down, with head heavy and heart bursting, on a moss-clad stone, his musket across his knees, his eyes, now on the sky, now on the sea, so absorbed in listening to the voice of his soul that the two hunters were soon far away from him without his noticing it.

D'Artagnan remarked on his absence.

"Still wounded?" said he to Athos.

"To the death!"

"Oh, I think you exaggerate. Raoul has a fine cast of character. A heart so noble as his will soon be sheathed in a second envelope which will serve it as a cuirass. The first bleeds, but the second resists."

"No," replied Athos, "it will kill him."

"*Mordieux!*" exclaimed D'Artagnan, gloomily.

And he did not add a word to this exclamation. After a few moments' silence:

"Why do you let him go?"

"Because I would not see him die."

D'Artagnan stared at his friend.

"You know one fact, at least," continued Athos, "you know that few things have frightened me during the course of my life. Well, I am now in the clutches of an incessant, gnawing, insurmountable fear, a fear that the day is at hand when I shall clasp the dead body of my child in my arms."

"Oh!" exclaimed D'Artagnan; "oh!"

"He will die, I know it, am convinced of it. I would not see him die."

"What, Athos! You are face to face with the bravest man you say you have ever known, your own D'Artagnan, a man without his parallel, as you used to say in other times, — and with folded arms you tell that man you are afraid of seeing your son die, you who have seen all that can be seen in the world? Why are you afraid of this, Athos? Man in this world must expect everything and be prepared to meet everything."

"Hear me, my friend. After having worn out my life in this world of which you speak, I have kept but two religions: the religion of life, embracing my friendships and my paternal duties; and the religion of eternity, embracing my love and reverence for God. Now I have an inward revelation that if God allowed my friend or my son to breathe his last sigh in my presence — oh! no, I cannot bring myself to say it, D'Artagnan."

"Speak! speak!"

"I am strong against everything except the death of those I love. For this alone there is no remedy. He who dies wins, but he who looks on at the death of another loses. Stay — to know that I shall never, never more, in this world, look upon him whose face I have looked upon with such joy; to know that nowhere shall I find a D'Artagnan, nowhere a Raoul, oh! — I am old, you see, and have lost courage. I pray to God to spare my weakness; for if he smote me in that way, I should curse him. A Christian gentleman should not curse his God, D'Artagnan; it is enough to have cursed his King!"

"Hun!" muttered D'Artagnan, somewhat shaken by this tempest of violent sorrow.

"Look at Raoul, my friend, you who love him," added Athos, pointing to his son. "You see in his face a sadness that will never leave it. Can you imagine anything more awful than to be forced to witness, hour by hour and minute by minute, the incessant agony of that poor heart?"

"Let me speak to him, Athos. Something may come of it."

"Try; but I am convinced you will not succeed."

"I will not offer to console, but to serve him."

"You will?"

"Undoubtedly. Do you believe a woman has never repented of her faithlessness before? I will go to him, I tell you."

Athos shook his head, and continued his walk alone. D'Artagnan cut through the brushwood, reached Raoul, and offered him his hand.

"Well," inquired he, "you have something to say to me?"

"I have to ask you to do me a service," answered Bragelonne.

"Ask it."

"You will return to France, some day or other?"

"I hope so."

"Ought I to write to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"No, you ought not."

"I have so many things to tell her!"

"Come and say them to her, then."

"Never!"

"What virtue do you ascribe to a letter which your spoken word does not possess?"

"You are right."

"She loves the King," said D'Artagnan, roughly; "she is an honest girl."

Raoul started.

"And although she has forsaken you, she loves you more than the King, perhaps; but in a different way."

"D'Artagnan, you are quite sure she loves the King?"

"To idolatry. Her heart is inaccessible to any other sentiment. If you were willing to live near her, you might be her best friend."

"Ah!" cried Raoul, violently tempted by that painful prospect.

"Will you?"

"It would be base."

"If you use such an absurd word as that, I shall be tempted to despise your understanding. Raoul, it is never base, look you, to do that which is imposed by a superior force. If your heart says: 'Go there, or die,' go there, by all means. Was she base or was she honorable when, though she loved you, she preferred the King to you, because her heart imperiously commanded her to prefer him to you? No, she was the most honorable of women. Act like her, act in obedience to your own heart. Do you know, Raoul, I am sure of one thing?"

"Of what?"

"That when you are near her and view her with the eyes of a jealous man.—"

"Well?"

"You will cease to love her."

"Then that decides me, my dear D'Artagnan."

"To go and see her?"

"No, to go where I can never see her; for I would love her forever."

"To speak frankly," rejoined the musketeer, "that is a conclusion I little expected."

"Hold, my friend. You will see her, and you will give her this letter, which will explain to you what is passing in my heart. Read it; I prepared it last night. Something told me I should see you to-day."

He handed the letter to D'Artagnan, who read :

"MADEMOISELLE: I do not blame you because you did not love me. But I blame you because you let me believe that you loved me. This mistake will cost me my life. I forgive you for it, but I do not forgive myself. It is said that happy lovers are deaf to the complaints of rejected lovers. It cannot be so with you whose love for me was only friendship. I am sure that if I had tried to change that friendship into love, you would have yielded from fear of being the cause of my death, or seeing my esteem for you lessened. It is very sweet for me to die, knowing that you are free and contented.

"How much, then, will you love me when you no longer fear to meet my eyes or my reproaches! You will love me because, however charming a new love may appear to you, God has created me in no way inferior to him whom you have chosen, and because my devotion, self-sacrifice, and sad end will convince you that, in some ways, I was his superior. In the artless credulity of my heart, I have allowed to slip from my possession the treasure which I held. Many have told me you once loved me so well that you must have come in course of time to love me passionately. This banishes all bitterness from my soul and leads me to regard myself as my only enemy.

"You will accept this last farewell, and you will bless me for going to find a refuge in that inviolable asylum in which hate expires, but in which love lasts forever.

"Adieu, mademoiselle. Could my blood purchase your happiness, I would shed the last drop of it. I offer it as a sacrifice to my misery.

"RAOUL, VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE."

"Your letter is all right," said the captain. "I have only one fault to find with it."

"Tell me what it is," cried Raoul.

"It is that it tells everything except the thing that exhales a deadly poison from your eyes and from your heart; everything except the insane passion that is still burning you."

Raoul turned pale and was silent.

"Why did you not write merely these words :

" 'MADEMOISELLE: Instead of cursing you, I still love you, and I die.' "

"You are right," said Raoul, with a sinister joy.

And tearing the letter he had received back from D'Artagnan, he wrote on a leaf of his tablets :

"In order to have the happiness of telling you I still love you, I am guilty of the baseness of writing to you ; and to punish myself for that baseness, I die."

And he signed.

"You will give her these tablets, captain ?" said he.

"When ?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"On the day," said Bragelonne, pointing to the last phrase, "on the day you write the date under these words."

And he abruptly left the musketeer and ran up to Athos, who was slowly returning.

When they came back to the fort, the sea rose with that sudden violence which is so frequent during the unforeseen squalls that trouble the Mediterranean, when the ill-humor of the elements quickly changes to an angry storm.

"What is that over yonder ?" asked Athos. "A wrecked boat ?"

"It is not a boat," answered D'Artagnan.

"Excuse me," interposed Raoul, "it is a boat, and it is rapidly gaining the harbor."

"Yes, there is a boat entering the creek, I see, and it did well to seek shelter ; but what Athos is pointing to in the sands is not a boat, though it has run aground."

"Yes, yes, I see it."

"It is the carriage I threw into the sea when I landed with my prisoner."

"Take my advice, then, and burn that carriage, so that no trace of it may remain," said Athos. "Otherwise the Antibes fishermen, who believe that they have had a tussle with the devil, may succeed in proving that your prisoner was only a man."

"Your suggestion is worth attending to, and I will have it carried out, or, rather, carry it out myself to-night. But come in at once ; we are going to have a rain-storm, and the lightning is terrific."

As they were passing over the ramparts to the gallery of which D'Artagnan had the key, they saw M. de Saint-Mars on his way to the prisoner's apartment. At a sign from D'Ar-



THE PRISONER HALTED FOR A MOMENT TO CONTEMPLATE THE INFINITE HORIZON.

tagnan they concealed themselves in an angle of the staircase.

"What is the matter?" asked Athos.

"You'll see. Look. The prisoner is about to return from chapel."

And by the glare of the red flashes of lightning against the fog stamped with violet on the skyey background, they saw pass gravely, at six paces behind the governor, a man in black and masked by a visor of burnished steel soldered to a helmet of the same material, so that his head was entirely concealed. The fires that were darting through the heavens were reflected in red flashes on this polished surface, which flew off capriciously, seeming like wrathful looks, hurled at mankind by this unhappy wretch, instead of imprecations.

The prisoner halted for a moment in the middle of the gallery, to contemplate the infinite horizon before him, breathe the odors of the sulphurous tempest, and drink in greedily the warm rain. Then he heaved a sigh that was like a roar.

"Come along, monsieur," said Saint-Mars to the prisoner, roughly, for he had grown uneasy at seeing him gaze so long beyond the walls; "come on, monsieur, I say!"

"Say *monseigneur*!" shouted Athos from his corner, in a voice so solemn and terrible that the governor shivered from head to foot.

It was a principle with Athos to insist on respect for fallen majesty.

The prisoner turned round.

"Who spoke?" asked Saint-Mars.

"I," replied D'Artagnan, showing himself. "You know well that such is the order."

"Call me neither *monseigneur* nor *monsieur*," said the prisoner, in a voice that thrilled Raoul to the very depths of his soul. "Call me ACCURSED!"

And he passed on.

The iron door creaked behind him.

"An unfortunate man, indeed!" murmured the musketeer, in a hollow voice, pointing out to Raoul the chamber inhabited by the prince.

CHAPTER LX.

PROMISES.

D'ARTAGNAN had hardly returned to his apartment with his two friends, when one of the soldiers announced that the governor wanted to see him.

The vessel which Raoul had perceived at sea, and which was in such a hurry to enter the creek, had come to Sainte-Marguerite with an important despatch for the captain of the musketeers. As soon as D'Artagnan opened it he recognized the King's handwriting.

"*I think,*" said Louis XIV., "*that you must have, by this time, executed my orders, M. d'Artagnan. Return, then, immediately, and join me at the Louvre.*"

"So now my exile is over!" cried the musketeer, joyfully. "Thank God I am no longer a jailer!"

And he showed Athos the letter.

"So you are leaving us?" replied the count, sadly.

"Yes, but to meet soon again, my dear friend. Raoul is a tall, strong young fellow and can make his way very well himself with M. de Beaufort. Besides, he will much prefer that his father return in M. d'Artagnan's company, rather than have him travel alone a couple of hundred leagues to La Fère; am I not right, Raoul?"

"Certainly," stammered Raoul, with an expression of tender regret.

"No, no, my friend," broke in Athos, "I will not leave Raoul until the moment when his ship vanishes beyond the horizon. So long as he stays in France, he and I are inseparable."

"As you will, dear friend; but at least we'll leave Sainte-Marguerite together; you will take advantage of the boat which is to take me to Antibes."

"With all my heart. We cannot get too soon or too far away from the fortress and the spectacle which saddened us just now."

The three friends, then, quitted the island, first bidding good-bye to the governor, and saw for the last time the walls of the fortress, which loomed up white in the last flashes of the expiring storm.

D'Artagnan took leave of his friends that very night, after

witnessing the burning of the carriage by order of M. de Saint-Mars, who had followed his instructions.

Before taking horse, and just after embracing Athos :

"My friends," said he, "you bear too close a resemblance to soldiers who have deserted their post. Something tells me that your presence would be needed to maintain Raoul in his proper rank. And would you like me to pass over into Africa with a hundred muskets ? The King will not object, and I'll take you with me."

"M. d'Artagnan," replied Raoul, pressing his hand and deeply moved, "thanks for your offer, which would give M. le Comte and me more than we want. But I am young, and stand in need of labor of mind and fatigue of body, while the count stands in need of the most profound repose. You are his best friend, and I recommend him to your care. By watching over him you will hold both our souls in your hand."

"I must be off ; my horse is getting fretful," said D'Artagnan, with whom the most evident sign of strong emotion was his giving a new turn to the conversation. "Well, count, how many days has Raoul to stay here ?"

"Three at the most."

"And how long will it take you to return home ?"

"Oh, it will take me some considerable time," answered Athos. "I do not want to get too far away from Raoul all at once. He will be travelling too rapidly away from me for me to assist him in widening the distance between us. I intend going by half stages."

"Why so, my friend ? Slow travelling is a source of melancholy in itself, and hotel life is no longer suited to you."

"My friend, I have used post horses in coming hither, but I am about to purchase two fine chargers. Now, if they are to reach La Fère in good condition, I cannot let them travel more than seven or eight leagues a day."

"Where is Grimaud ?"

"He arrived yesterday morning with Raoul's appointments, and I let him sleep."

"Which means that Raoul will never return," murmured D'Artagnan, unconsciously. "*Au revoir*, then, my dear Athos, and the more diligent you are, the sooner shall I have the pleasure of embracing you."

Whereupon he set his foot in the stirrup, which was held for him by Raoul.

"Adieu!" said the young man, embracing him.

"Adieu!" returned D'Artagnan, getting into the saddle.

His horse swerved aside and separated the cavalier from his friends.

This scene took place in front of the house hired by Athos near the gates of Antibes, and where D'Artagnan, after supper, had ordered his horses to be led. The highway began at that point and stretched far in the distance, white and undulating in the fogs of the night. The horse inhaled eagerly the bitter salt odors that came from the marshes.

D'Artagnan broke into a trot, and Athos returned slowly to the house with Raoul.

Suddenly the echo of a horse's hoofs smote on their ears, coming nearer and nearer. At first they believed it was one of those singular reverberations that deceive the ear at every bend of a road. But it was D'Artagnan returning, D'Artagnan galloping back to his friends. They uttered a cry of joyful surprise, and the captain, leaping from his horse with the agility of youth, clasped the two beloved forms in his arms. He held them in a long and silent embrace, without giving vent to the sigh that was bursting his breast. Then he galloped away as swiftly as he had come, plunging both the rowels into the flanks of his maddened steed.

"Alas!" said the count, under his breath; "alas!"

"A bad omen," D'Artagnan thought, while he was making up for lost time, "I could not smile upon them. A bad omen!"

The next day Grimaud was stirring again; the orders of M. de Beaufort were carried out successfully. By the exertions of Raoul the flotilla was under sail for Toulon, dragging after it, in skiffs so small as to be almost invisible, the wives and friends of the fishermen and smugglers who had been pressed into the service of the fleet.

The short time still left to father and son to be together seemed to be flying away with double and startling rapidity, as would appear to be the case with everything that tends to fall into the gulf of eternity.

Athos and Raoul returned to Toulon, which was filled with all sorts of noises: rattling of wagons, clanking of arms, neighing of horses. Trumpets were sounding, drums were beating, and the streets were fairly packed with soldiers, lackeys, and tradesmen.

The Duc de Beaufort was everywhere, spurring on the preparations for embarking with all the zeal and energy of a good captain. He was kindly and good-natured to all his comrades, even the humblest, and he was sharp with his lieutenants, even the proudest.

He wished to see everything for himself, artillery, provisions, baggage; he inspected the equipment of every soldier, and made sure that every horse was sound. It was felt that, however frivolous, vain-glorious, and selfish he might have shown himself in his palace, the nobleman was now a captain, the *grand seigneur*, an officer, bravely facing the responsibilities he had accepted.

Still it must be confessed that, whatever the care exercised on the preparations, it was easy to recognize on the present occasion the thoughtless precipitation and absence of all precaution which make the French soldier the finest soldier in the world, for the very simple reason that there is no other soldier in the world so entirely abandoned to his own physical and mental resources.

Everything being satisfactory or, at least, appearing to be so, the admiral complimented Raoul and gave the final orders for weighing anchor, which was to take place the next day at daybreak.

He invited the count and his son to dinner. They excused themselves, however, under the pretext that their services were required elsewhere, and were allowed to retire. After a hasty repast in their hostelry, situated under the trees of the Grande Place, Athos conducted Raoul to the rocky heights that towered above the city, vast, gray mountains from which the view is so extensive that the liquid horizon it embraces seems, because of its distance, to be on a level with the rocks themselves.

The night was beautiful, as it always is in these happy climates. The moon, rising behind the heights, spread like a silver sheet over the blue carpet of the sea. In the roadstead the vessels, which were to take such a position as to facilitate the embarkation, were going through their manœuvres in silence. The sea, charged with phosphorus, opened beneath the hulls of the barks which transported the baggage and munitions of war. Every dip of the prow churned this gulf of white flame, and every oar dropped liquid diamonds from its blade.

The sailors, cheered by the bounty of the admiral, might be heard murmuring their slow and artless songs, and the creaking of the chains was blended with the dull thud of the bullets dropping into the holds. The whole spectacle and its attendant harmonies contracted the heart like fear and expanded it like hope. All this life smacked of death.

Athos sat down with his son on the moss among the brambles of the promontory. Around his head whirled large bats in the frightful gyrations of their blind chase. Raoul's feet hung over the edge of the cliff and bathed in that void which is peopled by vertigo and challenges annihilation.

When the moon was entirely risen and shone lovingly on the neighboring peaks; when the watery mirror was illuminated throughout its full extent; and when the little red lights had pierced through the black masses of the ship, Athos collected all his ideas, and all his courage, and said to his son:

"God has made all that we see, Raoul; he has also made us, poor atoms amid this mighty universe. We shine like yonder lights and stars; we sigh like yonder waves; we suffer like yonder huge ships that wear out their strength in buffeting the billows, obedient to the wind that hurries them to their goal, as the breath of God hurries us to a haven. Everything loves life, Raoul, and every living thing is beautiful."

"Yes, indeed, monsieur," answered Raoul, "the spectacle before us is very beautiful."

"What a noble-souled man is D'Artagnan!" exclaimed Athos, suddenly, "and what a rare blessing it has been that I have been supported during a lifetime by such a friend. Ah! Raoul, a friend like that is what has been lacking in your life."

"I have lacked a friend like that?" repeated the young man, in surprise.

"M. de Guiche is a charming comrade," rejoined the count, coldly; "but I believe that in the age we live in, men are more preoccupied with their own interests and their own pleasures than they were in my time. You have preferred a secluded life; you have done well, perhaps, but you have lost some of your strength in it. We four, severed from those delicate refinements in which you take so much delight, opposed a much more vigorous resistance to misfortune than you seem able to do —"

"I do not interrupt you, monsieur, to tell you that I had a friend, and that that friend is M. de Guiche. Certainly, he is kind, generous, and attached to me, though. But I have lived under the guardianship of another friendship, monsieur, as strong and as priceless as that of which you have spoken, for it is yours."

"No, I have not been a friend to you, Raoul."

"Why not, monsieur?"

"Because I gave you cause to believe that life had only one face; because being, alas! naturally sad and austere, I have in your case — without intending it, God knows — pruned away the joyous buds that spring forth incessantly from the tree of youth; because, in a word, I repent now that I did not train you to be an expansive, boisterous, even dissipated man."

"I know why you are saying this, monsieur. But you are wrong. It is not you who have made me what I am; it was that love which clutched me at a time when boys have only inclinations; it was that constancy which with others is a habit, but with me is inherent in my nature. I believed that I should always be what I was; I believed that God had placed me in a path all smooth and straight, lined with fruit and flowers. I felt that your vigilance and strength were over me, and I felt vigilant and strong. Nothing prepared me for the future. I fell once, and that fall deprived me of courage for all my life. I speak the truth when I say that I am the source of my own ruin. Oh! no, monsieur. Whatever happiness I have had in the past, whatever hopes I may have had in the future, are due to you. No, I have no fault to find with life such as you shaped it for me. I bless and love you ardently."

"My dear Raoul, your words comfort me. They tell me your actions will be somewhat guided by consideration for me in the time to come."

"Will be so entirely, monsieur."

"Raoul, what I have never done hitherto in your regard, I shall do henceforward. I shall be your friend rather than your father. When you return, we will live in perfect confidence, instead of living like prisoners. And you will return soon?"

"Certainly, monsieur. Such an expedition cannot last long."

"Then you will return soon, Raoul; and in place of living moderately on our income, I will give you the capital of my estates. It will be sufficient to open a career for you in the

world until my death, and you will, I hope, afford me before that time the consolation of knowing that my race is not likely to become extinct."

"Every command of yours shall be obeyed," answered Raoul, in a state of great agitation.

"Your duty as aide-de-camp should not lead you into too hazardous enterprises, Raoul. Your valor is proved; every one knows what you are under fire. Remember that the sort of war waged by the Arabs is a war of ambuscades and assassination."

"So I have been told, monsieur."

"There is never much glory in falling in an ambuscade. Such a death is usually the result of rashness or thoughtlessness. Often there is no regret for the victim of an ambuscade. Now, those who die unregretted, Raoul, die uselessly. Moreover, the conqueror laughs, and men like us should not give stupid infidels a chance to triumph because of our faults. You understand what I mean, Raoul? God forbid that I should exhort you to shrink from battle!"

"I am naturally prudent, monsieur, and I have had great good fortune," answered Raoul, with a smile that froze the poor father's heart, for the young man added hastily:

"I have been in a score of battles, and I have only one single scratch to show for all of them."

"You must also think of the climate," continued Athos. "Fever is a very unpleasant ending. Saint Louis used to pray to God to send him an arrow or the plague rather than fever."

"Oh, monsieur, by being temperate and taking reasonable exercise —"

"M. de Beaufort," interrupted Athos, "has promised me to forward his despatches to France every fortnight. As his aide-de-camp, you will have charge of them. You will not forget me, will you?"

"Oh! no, no, monsieur," said Raoul, hardly able to speak from emotion.

"And finally, as you are a good Christian — as I hope I am — you must put yourself under the special protection of God and of your guardian angel. Promise that, should any misfortune befall you, you will think of me first of all."

"First of all. Oh! yes."

"And that you will call for me."

"Immediately."

"Do you ever dream of me, Raoul?"

"Every night, monsieur. When I was a boy I used to see you in my dreams, calm and gentle, with your hand stretched over my head; and that was why I used to sleep so soundly — *formerly.*"

"We love each other so intensely," said the count, "that I am quite sure a part of our two souls will mutually journey with us, dwelling with us wherever we dwell. When you are sad, Raoul, I feel that my heart will be plunged in sadness, and when, at thought of me, a smile lights up your countenance, be sure that a ray from that brightness will travel to light up mine."

"I do not promise to be joyous," replied the young man; "but rest assured that not an hour shall pass without my thinking of you; not an hour, except I am dead."

Athos could no longer control himself; he threw his arms about his son's neck, and embraced him with all the strength of his heart. Moonlight had given place to twilight; a golden band was ascending above the horizon, heralding the approach of day. Athos threw his cloak about Raoul's shoulders, and led him towards the city, in which porters were running about with their burdens, like ants in some vast ant-hill.

At the end of the plateau which Athos and Raoul were quitting, they saw a black shadow wavering undecidedly and apparently ashamed of being seen. It was Grimaud, who, being uneasy about his master, had tracked him and was now awaiting his appearance.

"Why, Grimaud, what are you doing here?" cried Raoul. "Or have you come to tell us it is time to depart?"

"Alone?" answered Grimaud, pointing to Raoul, and looking reproachfully at Athos, which was in itself proof of his unusual agitation.

"You are right!" cried the count. "No, Raoul shall not depart alone. He shall not remain on a foreign soil, with no friend to console him and remind him of all that he loved."

"I?" said Grimaud.

"You? Yes, yes!" exclaimed Raoul, moved to the very depths of his soul.

"Alas!" murmured Athos, "you are very old, my dear Grimaud."

"So much the better," replied the latter, with a depth of feeling and intelligence impossible to describe.

"But the embarkation is now going on, and you are not ready," said Raoul.

"Yes," answered Grimaud, showing the keys of his trunks mixed with those of his young master.

"But," objected Raoul, "you cannot leave M. le Comte alone in this fashion? You have never, certainly, left him before."

Grimaud turned his dim eyes on Athos, as if he were weighing the strength of each of them in turn.

The count did not speak.

"M. le Comte wishes it," said Grimaud.

Athos made a sign of assent.

At that moment all the drums beat in unison and the clarions filled the air with their inspiring notes. The regiments that were to form part of the expedition began defiling from the city.

There were five of them, each composed of forty companies. The Régiment Royal was in the van, easily recognized by its white uniform with blue facings. The regimental colors, quartered crosswise, violet and purple with a sprinkling of golden fleur-de-lis, allowed the white-colored banner, with its fleur-de-lis cross, to float above all the others. Musketeers on the flanks, with their forked sticks in their hands and their muskets on their shoulders; pikemen in the centre, with their lances fourteen feet long, marched gayly to the transports which were to take them to their several vessels. The regiments of Picardy, Navarre, Normandy, and the Royal-Vaisseau came next.

M. de Beaufort proved that he knew well how to select his soldiers. He himself might be seen in the distance, closing up the line of march in the midst of his staff. A full hour would have to elapse before he could reach the sea.

Raoul moved slowly towards the beach, since he would not have to embark until the prince did so. Grimaud, boiling with all the ardor of youth, was having Raoul's baggage carried to the flag-ship. Athos, his arm linked with that of the son he was about to lose, was sunk in a gloomy reverie, deaf to all the bustle and uproar.

Suddenly an officer of M. de Beaufort rode up to inform them that the duke wished to see Raoul at his side.

"Have the goodness to say to the prince, monsieur," cried the young man, "that I request him to allow me to spend this hour with M. le Comte."

"No, no," interrupted Athos, "an aide-de-camp cannot leave his general in this fashion. Have the goodness to say to the prince, monsieur, that the viscount will be with him immediately."

The officer galloped away.

"Whether we part here or yonder," added the count, "the separation will be the same."

He carefully dusted his son's doublet, and passed his hand over his head while walking by his side.

"Hold," said he, "you will need money. M. de Beaufort is accustomed to live in magnificent style, and I am certain you will wish to purchase horses and arms in the country you are going to, where they are excessively costly. Now, since you are neither in the service of the King nor of M. de Beaufort, but are simply a volunteer, you need not expect either pay or largesses. I am anxious that you should want for nothing at Djidgelli. Here are two hundred pistoles. Spend them, Raoul, if you desire to please me."

Raoul pressed his father's hand and at the turn of a street they saw M. de Beaufort. He was mounted on a splendid jennet, which curveted gracefully in response to the applause of the women of the city. The duke called Raoul, and offered his hand to the count. He spoke to him at length, and so sympathetically that the poor father's heart was somewhat comforted.

Nevertheless, both father and son knew that at the end of their march was to be the climax of their agony. It was a terrible moment when the soldiers and sailors exchanged, when about to leave the beach, the last kisses with their families and friends; one of those supreme moments when, in spite of azure skies and the genial warmth of the sun, and the balmy air, and the sweetness of the life circulating in the veins, everything appears black, everything appears bitter, everything suggests doubts of God, even when speaking by God's own mouth.

It was the custom for the admiral and his suite to be the last to embark; the cannon was waiting to announce with its formidable voice, then, that the leader had placed his foot on board his vessel.

Athos, forgetful of both admiral and fleet, and of his own dignity as a strong man, opened his arms to his son, and clasped him convulsively to his breast.

"Come on board with us," said the duke, very much affected; "you will have a full half hour more."

"No," replied Athos; "I have said farewell once, I do not wish to say it again."

"Then embark, viscount, embark at once," added the prince, wishing to spare the tears of these two men whose hearts were bursting.

And with the tenderness of a father and the strength of a Porthos, he took Raoul up in his arms and placed him in the boat, the oars of which, at a signal, were at once dipped in the waves.

"Adieu!" cried Raoul.

Athos answered only by a sign; but he felt as if something were burning his hand: it was Grimaud's reverent kiss, the last farewell of a faithful servant. The kiss given, Grimaud leaped from the steps of the mole into a two-oared yawl, which was towed by a lighter served by twelve galley-oars.

Athos sat down on the mole, stunned, deaf, forsaken. Every second robbed him of one of the lineaments, one of the features, of the pale face of his son. He and Raoul were still one, and with arms relaxed and haggard eyes and open mouth, he looked like him, thought like him, and, like him, was almost stupefied.

The sea gradually carried away boats and faces to that far-away limit where man is but a point and love but a memory.

Athos saw his son climbing the ladder of the flag-ship, saw him leaning against the rigging, and so posted that he might always be in view of his father. In vain thundered the cannon, in vain rose from the ships a loud, prolonged cheer from the fleet answered from the shore with vociferous acclamations, in vain did the shouting try to deafen the father's ears, in vain did the smoke try to hide the goal of all his aspirations; he had eyes for nothing but Raoul until the last moment, until he vanished like an imperceptible atom, passing from black to pale, from pale to white, from white to nothing, long after the lordly ships and swelling sails had vanished from the gaze of the spectators.

About noon, when the sun was filling all space with his most dazzling rays, and the tops of the masts were hardly

descried above the incandescent sea, Athos beheld a soft, aerial mist floating in the atmosphere, a mist that melted away as soon as seen: it was the smoke of a cannon which De Beaufort had ordered to be fired as a last salute to France.

Then Athos returned slowly and painfully to his inn.

CHAPTER LXI.

AMONG WOMEN.

D'ARTAGNAN was unable to hide his feelings as successfully from his friends as he would have wished. The stoical soldier, the impassive man-at-arms, vanquished by fears and evil omens, was for a time the captive of human weakness. When he had stilled the beating of his heart and calmed the agitation of his nerves, he turned to his lackey, a taciturn servitor always on the watch, so as to obey the quicker.

"Rabaud," said he, "you know that I must travel thirty leagues a day."

"Very well, captain," answered Rabaud.

And from that moment D'Artagnan, who, like a genuine centaur, was really a part of his horse when in the saddle, no longer bothered his head about anything, or rather bothered it about everything.

He wondered why the King was recalling him; why the Iron Mask had flung a silver dish at Raoul's feet.

As to the first question, he knew only too well that, if the King recalled him, it was because the King could not help himself; he knew, too, that the King must have an irresistible inclination to hold a private conversation with one whom the possession of a great secret placed on a level with the most exalted personages in the realm. But as to knowing exactly what the King wanted, D'Artagnan was completely at fault.

On the other hand, the musketeer was no longer in any doubt as to the reason which had impelled the unfortunate Philippe to reveal his disposition and his birth. Philippe, buried forever under his iron mask; Philippe, exiled to a country where the men seemed to be little more than the slaves of the elements; Philippe, deprived even of the society

of D'Artagnan, who had lavished on him all kinds of respectful and delicate attentions, — Philippe had nothing to look forward to in this world but terrors and misfortunes, and, despair beginning to gnaw his heart, he had resolved to spread abroad his lamentations, in hopes that his revelations might raise up for him an avenger.

The manner in which the musketeer had narrowly escaped killing his two best friends, the fate which had so strangely made Athos a sharer in the great secret, the farewell of Raoul, the obscurity of that future which threatened to end in sadness and death — all this filled him with melancholy forebodings, forebodings he could not scatter now, as he could have done once, by breaking into a gallop.

And then D'Artagnan's thoughts wandered to his outlawed friends, Porthos and Aramis. He saw them pursued and fleeing, both utterly ruined, both the laborious architects of fortunes they were now about to lose; and, since the King always called for his man of execution in his moments of vengeance and rancor, D'Artagnan trembled at the thought of receiving a commission that must make his heart bleed.

Sometimes on riding up a steep, when the overspent steed was breathing hard from his nostrils and heaving his sides, the captain could meditate more freely, and then his mind turned on that prodigious genius, crafty and intriguing, of an Aramis, a genius the like of which had been produced only twice during the Fronde and the civil war. Soldier, priest, diplomatist, at once ambitious and cunning, Aramis had never used the good things of life except as stepping-stones to the bad. Generous in spirit, though not high in heart, he did evil solely for the purpose of shining a little more brilliantly. And now, at the close of his career, just when he was about to reach his goal, he had, like the patrician Fieschi, taken one false step, and fallen from the plank into the sea forever.

But Porthos, the kind-hearted and innocent Porthos! Porthos hungry, Mousqueton without his gold lace, and both, perhaps, in prison; Pierrefonds and Bracieux razed to the ground, dishonored to the very timber of their forests, — every thought of the catastrophe was a torture to D'Artagnan that made him bound like his horse when stung by a gadfly under the foliage where it had sought shelter.

But a man of spirit is never entirely prostrated if he exposes his body to every kind of fatigue, and never does the

man who is sound in body find his life entirely lacking in enjoyment if his mind be employed. When D'Artagnan, who always kept on galloping as well as thinking, alighted in Paris, his muscles were as supple and elastic as those of the athlete who has been preparing for the gymnasium.

The King had not expected him so soon and had just started on a hunting expedition in the direction of Meudon. Instead of following him, as he would have done once, D'Artagnan had his boots pulled off, took a bath, and waited till his Majesty should return, tired and dusty. He spent the next five hours in looking about him—finding out the lay of the land, as it were—and in arming himself against all evil chances.

He learned that the King had been very gloomy during the last fortnight; that the queen mother was ill and dejected; that Monsieur, the King's brother, seemed inclined to turn pious; that Madame had the vapors; and that M. de Guiche had gone to one of his estates.

He learned that M. Colbert was radiant, that M. Fouquet consulted a fresh doctor every day, who did not cure him, however, and that his disease was not one of those that are curable by physicians, except they be political physicians.

The King, D'Artagnan was told, was most affectionate to Fouquet, and hardly ever let him out of his sight. But the superintendent, stung to the heart, like one of those fine trees which a worm has punctured, was pining away, in spite of the royal smile, that sun of courtier trees.

D'Artagnan was informed that La Vallière had become indispensable to the King, and that, when he did not take her out hunting, he was in the habit of writing to her frequently—not verses now, but, what was worse, prose, and whole pages of it, too.

And so “the *first king in the world*,” as he was termed by the poetic Pleiad of the time, might be seen jumping from his saddle with “*inimitable ardor*,” and scribbling on the crown of his hat pompous phrases, wherewith M. de Saint-Aignan, aide-de-camp in perpetuity, galloped to La Vallière, at the risk of killing his horse.

While this was taking place, the stags and pheasants gambolled in security, being hunted so indolently that it was feared the art of venery was in danger of degenerating at the French court.

Then D'Artagnan thought of that hopeless letter which poor Raoul had written to a woman who spent her life in hoping, and since D'Artagnan was fond of philosophizing, he resolved to turn the King's absence to account by conversing for a few moments with Mademoiselle de la Vallière.

He had no difficulty in finding her; Louise, during the royal hunt, was promenading with some ladies in one of the galleries of the Palais-Royal, and it happened that the captain of the musketeers had to inspect the guards in that very quarter.

D'Artagnan was pretty certain that if he could manage to get an interview with Louise on the subject of Raoul, she would say something in reference to the latter that might give him an opportunity to write a consoling letter to the poor exile. Now, if there were any prospect of consoling him even in the slightest degree, it would be the very life of two men who were very dear to our captain.

He set out, then, for the place where he was sure of finding Mademoiselle de la Vallière.

When he saw her, she was surrounded by a very large circle. In her apparent solitude, the King's favorite, — just as if she were a queen, and more than if she were a queen, perhaps, — received that homage of which Madame had been so proud when the King had eyes only for her and the eyes of the courtiers had followed the eyes of the King.

D'Artagnan, though he had never been a gallant, was nevertheless the recipient of many attentions and civilities on the part of the ladies. He was always as courteous as he was brave, and his terrible reputation had won him as much admiration from women as friendship from men.

Consequently, as soon as he appeared, the maids of honor plied him with questions. Where had he been? What had become of him? How was it they had not seen him caroling on his fiery steed to the wondering admiration of the spectators in the King's balcony?

He replied that he had come back from the land of oranges.

The ladies burst out laughing. Although it was an age when everybody travelled, yet it was an age when a journey of three hundred leagues was a problem often solved by death.

"From the land of oranges?" cried Mademoiselle de Ton-nay-Charente; "from Spain?"

"Hum!" answered the musketeer.

"Then, from Malta?" said Montalais.

"*Ma foi*, you're nearer it, mademoiselle."

"From an island?" inquired La Vallière.

"Mademoiselle," answered D'Artagnan, "I will not put you to the trouble of guessing further. I have come from the country where M. de Beaufort has embarked on his way to Algiers."

"Did you see his army?" inquired several fair warriors.

"As plainly as I see you."

"And his fleet?"

"I saw everything."

"Were any of our friends there?" inquired Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, quietly, but yet in such a way as to attract attention to a question that was put with a motive.

"Yes," answered D'Artagnan, "M. de la Guillotière, M. de Mouchy, and M. de Bragelonne."

La Vallière turned pale.

"M. de Bragelonne!" exclaimed the perfidious Athenais. "What! has he gone to the war — he, too?"

Montalais trod on her foot, but without result.

"Do you know what I think?" she continued mercilessly, addressing D'Artagnan.

"No, mademoiselle; have the kindness to tell me."

"I think that all the men engaged in this war are desperate young men who have been ill-treated in love, and who have gone to Africa in hopes of finding black women kinder than the white ones they have left behind."

Some of the women laughed, La Vallière changed color, Montalais coughed loud enough to wake the dead.

"Mademoiselle," observed D'Artagnan, "you make a mistake when you speak of black women at Djidgelli; they are not black; it is true they are not white, either; they are yellow."

"Yellow?"

"Oh, don't find fault with it. It is the finest color I have ever seen when matched with black eyes and coral lips."

"So much the luckier for M. de Bragelonne!" returned Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, significantly; "the poor boy will be consoled for his loss!"

A profound silence followed these words.

It gave D'Artagnan time to reflect that women, those gentle doves, are more cruel to one another than tigers or bears.

Athenais was not contented with making La Vallière pale, she was resolved to make her red also.

Without much regard for propriety, she continued :

"Are you aware, Louise, that you have a very big sin on your conscience?"

"What sin, mademoiselle?" stammered the unfortunate creature, looking round for something to lean against, and not finding it.

"Why," answered Athenais, "that young man was betrothed to you. He loved you. Yet you repulsed him."

"That is a right every honest girl has," said Montalais, mincingly. "When you know you will not make a man happy, the best thing you can do is to cast him off."

Louise did not know whether she ought to be pleased or angry with a defender who defended her in this way.

"Repulse! cast off! Oh, that's all very fine," returned Athenais; "but that is not the sin for which Mademoiselle de la Vallière has to ask forgiveness. Her real sin was to send this young man to the war; to a war in which he is likely to be killed."

Louise pressed her hand on her ice-cold temples.

"And if he is killed," continued this pitiless persecutor, "you will have killed him; that is your sin."

Louise, who was ready to drop, tottered over and took the arm of D'Artagnan, whose face betrayed unusual emotion.

"You wish to speak with me, M. d'Artagnan?" said she, in tones that faltered from anger and grief. "What is it you have to say to me?"

D'Artagnan walked with her along the gallery; then, when they were out of earshot:

"Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente," he answered, "has just expressed everything I had to say to you, mademoiselle, though in a very harsh manner."

She uttered a faint cry, and, struck to the heart by this fresh arrow, she acted like the poor bird which, when wounded to the death, seeks the shade of a thicket to die. She disappeared through a door, just as the King was entering by another. The first glance of the prince was directed to the vacant seat of his mistress; not perceiving La Vallière, he frowned. Then he saw D'Artagnan, who bowed.

"Ah! monsieur," said he, "you have made good speed and I am pleased with you."

It was the superlative expression of the royal satisfaction. Many men were ready afterward to face death gladly for the chance of hearing such words as these from the King.

The maids of honor and the courtiers, who had formed a respectful circle around the monarch on his entrance, scattered when they saw he wished to talk in private with his captain of the musketeers.

The King, after once more looking round for La Vallière, whose absence he could not account for, led D'Artagnan out of the hall.

When they were beyond the reach of curious ears :

"Well, M. d'Artagnan," said he, "the prisoner?"

"In his prison, Sire."

"What did he say on the way?"

"Nothing, Sire."

"What did he do?"

"Well, the fishermen who were taking me to Saint-Marguerite revolted and did their best to kill me. The — the prisoner, instead of escaping, defended me."

The King grew pale.

"Enough," said he.

D'Artagnan bowed.

Louis strode up and down his cabinet.

"You were at Antibes," said he, "when M. de Beaufort was there?"

"No, Sire, I was leaving when he arrived."

"Ah!"

Silence again.

"Whom have you seen in those quarters?"

"A good many people," answered D'Artagnan, coldly.

The King saw that D'Artagnan did not care to speak.

"I have summoned you, M. le Capitaine," said he, "to prepare lodgings for me at Nantes."

"At Nantes?" cried D'Artagnan.

"In Bretagne."

"I know, Sire, in Bretagne. And so your Majesty is setting out on this long journey to Nantes?"

"The States are to assemble there. I have two demands to make of them, and so I wish to be present."

"When do I start?" inquired the captain.

"To-night — to-morrow — to-morrow night, for you require some rest."

"I have had it, Sire."

"Good! Well, this evening or to-morrow, at whatever hour suits you."

D'Artagnan was about to bow himself out; but seeing that the King was very much embarrassed, he advanced two steps and said:

"Does your Majesty's court go with you?"

"Of course."

"Then you will need the musketeers, Sire, I presume?"

And the keen eyes of the captain compelled the King to lower his.

"Take a brigade," replied Louis.

"Is that all? Has your Majesty no further orders?"

"No — Ah! — yes —"

"I am all attention."

"I have been told that things are managed in a very irregular fashion in the château at Nantes. You will, therefore, establish the custom of placing musketeers at the doors of the chief dignitaries I am taking with me."

"At the doors of the chief ones?"

"Yes."

"As, for instance, at the door of M. de Lyonne?"

"Yes."

"Of M. Letellier?"

"Yes."

"Of M. de Brienne?"

"Yes."

"Of M. le Surintendant?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Very well, Sire, I shall start to-morrow."

"Oh, a few words more, M. d'Artagnan. You will meet M. de Gesvres, captain of the guards, at Nantes. Let your musketeers be at their posts before his guards arrive. Precedence belongs to the first-comer."

"Yes, Sire."

"And if M. de Gesvres were to question you?"

"Oh, Sire! M. de Gesvres question me!"

And the musketeer turned very cavalierly on his heels and disappeared.

"To Nantes!" he said to himself, as he came downstairs. "Why had he not the courage to say at once, 'To Belle-Isle'?"

Just as he had reached the grand door one of M. de Brienne's clerks came running after him.

"Excuse me, M. d'Artagnan!" he cried.

"What is the matter, M. Ariste?"

"An order which the King has requested me to give you."

"On your department?" inquired the musketeer.

"No, monsieur, on M. Fouquet's."

D'Artagnan was surprised. He read the order, which was in the King's handwriting, and was for two hundred pistoles.

"Well, well," he thought, after courteously thanking M. de Brienne's clerk, "so he's going to make Fouquet pay the expenses of the journey! *Mordieux!* there's a touch of Louis XI. in that! Why did he not make the order payable at the office of M. Colbert? Colbert would have paid it with such pleasure!"

D'Artagnan, faithful to his principle of never letting an order at sight grow cold, started at once for M. Fouquet's residence, so as to pocket his two hundred pistoles as soon as possible.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE LAST SUPPER.

THE superintendent had no doubt received tidings of the approaching visit to Nantes, for he was giving a farewell dinner to his friends.

What with the hurrying to and fro of the lackeys bearing dishes, and the bustling activity of all Fouquet's clerks everywhere from the top to the bottom of the house, it looked as if there was soon to be a considerable commotion both in the kitchens and offices.

M. d'Artagnan appeared at the offices with the order in his hand. He was told, however, that it was too late, and that the cashier's office was closed.

He replied simply:

"On the King's service."

The clerk, rendered somewhat uneasy by the serious air of the captain, answered that the reason he gave was worthy of all respect, but the customs of the house were worthy of some respect also, and therefore he must beg him to call again to-morrow.

D'Artagnan requested to be shown into M. Fouquet's presence. The clerk replied that the superintendent did not interfere in such matters, and abruptly shut the outer door in D'Artagnan's face.

The musketeer had been expecting some such climax, and placed his boot between the door and the door-frame, so that the lock could not catch, and the clerk and he again were nose to nose. Thereupon the official lowered his tone and said, with a politeness that was entirely due to fear:

"If you want to speak with the superintendent, monsieur, you must go to the antechambers; these are the offices, into which monseigneur never comes."

"I am satisfied if you tell me where they are," replied D'Artagnan.

"At the other side of the court," answered the clerk, delighted to be rid of him.

D'Artagnan crossed the court and found himself amid a crew of lackeys.

"Monseigneur does not receive at this hour," he was told by a rascal who was carrying on his head a silver-gilt dish containing three pheasants and a dozen quail.

"Tell him," said the captain, bringing the lackey to a stand by laying hold of the brim of the dish, "that I am M. d'Artagnan, captain of his Majesty's musketeers."

The lackey gave vent to a cry of astonishment and disappeared.

D'Artagnan followed him slowly. He reached one of the antechambers in time to find M. Péliisson there, looking very pale, having just come from the dining-room to inquire what was the matter.

D'Artagnan smiled.

"Do not be uneasy, M. Péliisson. I have come only to get an order cashed."

"Ah!" exclaimed Fouquet's friend, breathing more freely.

And he took the captain's hand, and led him into the hall, where a considerable number of the superintendent's friends were sitting around a table, at the head of which sat Fouquet, propped up by cushions.

All the Epicureans were present—the same who did the honors at Vaux, and reflected such credit on the intellect and wealth of their patron.

Joyous and devoted friends, they had not fled from their pro-

tector on the approach of the tempest, and, despite threatening storms and earthquakes, there they were, smiling and cheerful, as faithful to him in misfortune as they had been in prosperity.

On the left of the superintendent was Madame de Bellière; on his right, Madame Fouquet; as if, braving the world's laws and despising vulgar conventionalities, the two guardian angels of this man had come together to support him with their interlaced arms at this critical moment.

Madame de Bellière was pale, trembling, respectful, and attentive to Madame Fouquet, who, her hand clasped in her husband's, was gazing anxiously at the door through which Péliisson was about to conduct D'Artagnan.

The captain entered courteously, preceding Péliisson. Then, when with his infallible glance he had read the meaning of the expression on every face, he was seized with wonder and admiration.

Rising up on his armchair, Fouquet said:

"Pardon me, M. d'Artagnan, for not going out to receive you, as you have come in the King's name."

And he dwelt on the closing words with a melancholy firmness which chilled the hearts of his friends with terror.

"Monseigneur," replied D'Artagnan, "I have come in the King's name, but only to request you to have an order cashed for two hundred pistoles."

Every one felt relieved; but Fouquet's brow remained overcast still.

"Ah!" he exclaimed; "you are going to Nantes, perhaps, monsieur?"

"I do not know where I am going, monseigneur."

"However," said Madame Fouquet, who had recovered her composure, "you are not in such a hurry, monsieur, as to prevent you from doing us the honor of sitting down with us for a while."

"Madame, it would indeed be a great honor for me, but I am so pressed for time that, as you see, I have been forced to take the liberty of interrupting you at your dinner to obtain payment of this order."

"Which will be made in gold," said Fouquet, making a sign to his intendant, who went out, taking the order with him.

"Oh," answered D'Artagnan, "I was not uneasy about the payment; the house is a good one."

A painful smile flitted over Fouquet's pallid features.

"Are you in pain?" inquired Madame de Bellière.

"Is your attack coming on?" inquired Madame Fouquet.

"Thank you both, no," answered the superintendent.

"Your attack?" asked D'Artagnan, in his turn. "Are you ill, monseigneur?"

"I am troubled with tertian fever; I caught it after the fête at Vaux."

"Caught cold at night in the grottoes?"

"No, it is the result of excessive agitation."

"It is the result of your too great eagerness to please the King by your reception of him," observed La Fontaine tranquilly, never suspecting that he was talking treason.

"No one can display too great eagerness when he receives his King," answered Fouquet, gently.

"Oh, M. de la Fontaine did not mean to say the contrary," interrupted D'Artagnan, frankly and courteously. "The fact is, monseigneur, that your hospitality at Vaux has never been equalled."

Madame Fouquet clearly showed by the expression of her face that, if Fouquet had behaved well to the King, the King was behaving anything but well to the minister.

But D'Artagnan knew the terrible secret. He and Fouquet were the only ones there who knew it, and one of them had not the courage to show his pity for the other, and the other had not the right to complain.

The captain, on receiving the two hundred pistoles, was about to take his leave, when Fouquet, rising, seized a glass and ordered one to be given to D'Artagnan.

"To the King's health, monsieur," said he, "*whatever happen!*"

"And to yours, monseigneur, *whatever happen!*" said D'Artagnan, draining off the glass.

After these ominous words he bowed to the company, who rose as soon as he had done so. Then they listened until the tramping of his boots and the jingling of his spurs died away at the foot of the stairs.

"I believed for a moment it was myself and not my money he was after," said Fouquet, attempting to laugh.

"You!" cried his friends. "In God's name, why?"

"Oh," returned the superintendent, "let us not deceive ourselves, my dear brethren in Epicurus. I would not compare the humblest sinner on the face of the earth to the God whom

we adore; but remember, he gave one day to his friends a repast which we name the Last Supper, and which was simply a farewell dinner like that which we are having at the present moment."

There was a sorrowful protest and denial from every corner of the table.

"Close the door," said Fouquet.

The servants then withdrew.

"My friends," continued Fouquet, lowering his voice, "what was I formerly? What am I now? Consult among yourselves and answer. A man like me sinks when he ceases to rise. What shall we say, then, when he really sinks? I have no longer either money or credit; I have no longer anything but powerful enemies and powerless friends."

"Then," cried Péliisson, rising abruptly, "since you are so frank with us, we should be frank also. Yes, you are ruined; moreover, you are running to court your ruin. Halt! And, first of all, how much money have you left?"

"Seven hundred thousand livres," answered the superintendent.

"Enough for bread!" murmured Madame Fouquet.

"Relays," cried Péliisson, "relays, and fly."

"Where?"

"To Switzerland, to Savoy, anywhere, but fly."

"If he fly," said Madame de Bellière, "it will be said that he was guilty and feared the consequences."

"And it will be added that I carried off twenty millions along with me," continued Fouquet.

"We will draw up memoirs to justify you," said La Fontaine; "fly."

"I will stay," said the superintendent, "and besides, is not everything in my favor?"

"You have Belle-Isle!" cried the Abbé Fouquet.

"And it is natural for me to go there after going to Nantes," answered Fouquet. "Patience, then, patience!"

"But what a tedious journey!" said Madame Fouquet.

"I know that well; but what can I do?" answered Fouquet. "The King has summoned me to meet the States. I know well his purpose in doing so is to ruin me. But to refuse to go would be to show I am afraid."

"Well, I think I have a plan that will reconcile everything," cried Péliisson. "You'll set out for Nantes."

Fouquet stared at him in surprise.

"But in your carriage as far as Orléans, in your galley as far as Nantes. You will be in a position to defend yourself if you are attacked, to escape if you are threatened. You will carry your money with you, to be prepared for every emergency; and, while flying, you have done nothing but obey the King. Then, reaching the sea whenever you wish, you will sail for Belle-Isle, and from Belle-Isle you can dart for whatever point you choose, like the eagle which rushes into space when he has been dislodged from his eyrie."

Péligon's words were approved unanimously.

"Yes, do it," said Madame Fouquet to her husband.

"Do it," said Madame de Bellière.

"Do it, do it!" cried all the friends.

"I will," answered Fouquet.

"To-night?"

"In an hour?"

"Immediately."

"With seven hundred thousand livres you will make a new fortune," said the Abbé Fouquet. "What can prevent you from fitting out privateers at Belle-Isle?"

"And, if need be, we'll go and discover a new world," added La Fontaine, intoxicated with enthusiasm.

A knock at the door interrupted this concert of joy and hope.

"A courier from the King!" announced the master of ceremonies.

A profound silence fell upon the company, as if the message brought by the courier were but the answer to all the plans that had sprung into existence a moment before. Every one awaited the action of the master, whose face was streaming with perspiration, and who undoubtedly, at this moment, was in a state of high fever. Fouquet passed into his cabinet to receive his Majesty's message. The silence was so intense in every apartment and among the servants that the voice of Fouquet could be heard answering:

"Very well, monsieur."

But this voice was trembling from fatigue, faltering from emotion. A moment later, Fouquet summoned Gourville, who crossed the gallery, while every one waited anxiously for what should happen next.

At last the superintendent appeared among his guests, but

not with the same pale, downcast face with which he had left them. That face was now wan, livid, deathlike. Like a living spectre, he advanced, with arms extended, with parched lips, a ghost returned to greet the friends of other days.

At this spectacle every one arose, every one cried out, every one ran up to Fouquet.

With a look at Péliisson, he leaned on his wife and grasped the hand of Madame de Bellière.

"Well!" he muttered, in a voice that had nothing human in it.

"For God's sake, what has happened?" he was asked.

Fouquet opened his right hand, which was damp and trembling; it held a paper which Péliisson pounced on in terror. He read the following lines in the King's hand:

"*DEAR AND WELL-BELOVED M. FOUQUET:*

"*Give us, out of what you still have belonging to us, the sum of seven hundred thousand livres, which we need to-day for our departure. And as we know your health is not good, we pray God for your recovery and entreat him to have you in his holy keeping.*

"*LOUIS.*

"*The present letter will serve as a receipt.'*"

A terrified murmur ran through the hall.

"Well, then," cried Péliisson, "you have the letter?"

"Yes, I have the receipt."

"What will you do, then?"

"Nothing, since I have the receipt."

"But —"

"If I have the receipt it is because I have paid the money," answered Fouquet, with a simplicity that spread consternation among the spectators.

"You have paid it?" cried Madame Fouquet, wringing her hands; "then we are ruined!"

"Oh, a truce to this, words are useless," interrupted Péliisson. "The money is gone; but there is still life. To horse, monseigneur, to horse!"

"What! leave us?" exclaimed the two women, wild with grief.

"Monseigneur, by saving yourself you save us. To horse!"

"But he cannot sit on a horse. Look at him!"

"Oh, but bethink you —" said the intrepid Péliſson.

"He is right," murmured Fouquet.

"Monseigneur ! monseigneur !" shouted Gourville, running up the stairs four steps at a time ; "monseigneur !"

"What is the matter ?"

"I escorted, as you are aware, the King's courier and the money."

"Yes."

"And when I came to the Palais-Royal, I saw —"

"Take breath, you are almost choking, my poor friend."

"What is it you saw ?" cried every one, impatiently.

"The musketeers mounting horse," said Gourville.

"There !" exclaimed all Fouquet's friends ; "there ! is there a moment to be lost ?"

Madame Fouquet rushed downstairs to call for her horses.

Madame de Bellière ran down after her, and, taking her in her arms, said :

"Madame, for his sake and his safety's sake, control yourself ; do not let any one see that you are alarmed."

Péliſson ran down to have the carriages put to.

And all the time the tearful and scared friends of the superintendent were pouring into Gourville's hat gold and silver, their last offering, the pious alms given to misfortune by poverty.

Dragged along by some and carried by others, Fouquet was at length shut up in his carriage. Gourville climbed to the box and seized the reins ; Péliſson was holding up Madame Fouquet, who had fainted.

Madame de Bellière showed more self-control ; she was well paid for it — she received Fouquet's last kiss.

Péliſson found an easy explanation for this hurried departure in the fact that the orders of the King had summoned his ministers to Nantes.

CHAPTER LXIII.

IN COLBERT'S CARRIAGE.

As Gourville had stated, the musketeers were mounting their horses and following their captain.

D'Artagnan, who did not care to be embarrassed in his movements, had placed his brigade under the orders of his lieutenant, and had himself set out on post horses, bidding his men to use all possible diligence. However swiftly they might ride, they could not arrive before him. He had leisure, when passing through the Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs, to notice an incident that gave him much food for thought. He saw M. Colbert leaving his house and getting into a carriage stationed before the door. In this carriage D'Artagnan observed that there were women's hoods, and, as he was naturally inquisitive, he wished to learn the names of the women hidden beneath these hoods.

In order to get a look at them, which was not easy, for they seemed to be very consequential persons indeed, he urged his horse so close to the carriage that his jack-boot struck violently against the mantlet, shaking up everything, both the carriage and its contents. One of the two terrified dames uttered a faint cry, from which D'Artagnan concluded she was young; the other, a round oath, in which he recognized the vigorous bluntness which a half a century supplies. The hoods fell back: one of the women was Madame Vanel; the other, the Duchesse de Chevreuse.

D'Artagnan's look was quicker than that of the ladies. He recognized them, and they did not recognize him; and while they were clasping affectionately each other's hands and laughing at their fright:

"Well!" said D'Artagnan, "the old duchess is n't as particular in her friendships as she used to be. Paying court to Colbert's mistress! A bad omen for poor M. Fouquet!"

And he rode away. M. Colbert entered the carriage, and the noble trio set out at a slow pace for the Bois de Vincennes.

After a time Madame de Chevreuse set down Madame Vanel at her husband's house, and then, being alone with Colbert, she conversed with him during their drive. Indeed, the conversa-

tional resources of that dear duchess were inexhaustible, and as she always spoke ill of the absent and well of those present, she was very amusing, and usually left a good impression behind her.

She informed Colbert what a great minister he was, — a fact of which he had been ignorant before, — and what a nonentity Fouquet was sure to be very soon. She promised that, when he was superintendent, she would rally the old nobility around him, and asked him what degree of prominence it might be judicious to allow to La Vallière. She praised, blamed, and bewildered him. She revealed the secret of so many secrets that Colbert feared for a moment he was holding a conference with the devil. She proved to him that she held the Colbert of to-day in the hollow of her hand, just as she had held the Fouquet of yesterday.

And when he innocently inquired why she hated the superintendent so bitterly she retorted :

“Why do you hate him yourself ?”

“Madame,” said he, “in politics different systems produce differences among men. M. Fouquet’s system has appeared to me to be totally opposed to the King’s interests.”

She interrupted him :

“Well, I do not care to speak of M. Fouquet any further. The journey of the King to Nantes will dispose of him. M. Fouquet is for me and for you, too, a man of the past.”

Colbert did not answer.

“When the King returns from Nantes, he will begin searching round him for a pretext,” continued the duchess, “and he will find that the States did not behave well, made too few sacrifices. The States will answer that the taxes are too heavy, and that the superintendent has ruined them. The King will lay the blame on M. Fouquet, and then —”

“And then ?” said Colbert.

“Oh, he will be disgraced. Is it not your own opinion ?”

Colbert flashed a glance at the duchess which meant :

“If nothing happen to him except being disgraced, it will not be your fault.”

“You must,” the duchess hastened to say, “hold a position that marks you out from other men, M. Colbert. Do you know of any one who can come between you and the King after M. Fouquet’s fall ?”

“I do not understand you,” he answered.

"You will understand me. What are your ambitions?"

"I have none."

"Then there was no advantage in bringing about the superintendent's downfall, M. Colbert. You are talking nonsense."

"I have had the honor of saying to you, madame —"

"Yes, yes, the King's interest; supposing, however, we speak of yours."

"Mine consists in attending to the affairs of his Majesty."

"Answer honestly. Do you, or do you not, want to ruin M. Fouquet?"

"Madame, I do not want to ruin anybody."

"Then I cannot understand why you bought from me, and at such an extravagant price, Mazarin's letters concerning M. Fouquet. And I cannot understand, either, why you laid these letters under the eyes of the King."

Colbert, taken aback, stared at the duchess uneasily.

"Madame," said he, "I understand still less why you should reproach me, after having got the money for doing so."

"Even if you cannot have what you wish, it is natural to wish to have what you wish."

"Perhaps that is the situation at present."

"Eh? you cannot —"

"I cannot, I confess, control certain influences near the King."

"That take M. Fouquet's part? Name them. Hold on, I'll help you."

"Do so, madame."

"La Vallière?"

"Oh, she has little influence and no knowledge of affairs. Besides, M. Fouquet has paid court to her."

"So if she defend him she accuses herself; eh?"

"I believe so."

"But there is yet another influence, is there not?"

"And a very important one, too."

"The queen mother?"

"Yes, her Majesty favors M. Fouquet to a degree that is very prejudicial to her son's interests."

"Do not believe it," said the old woman, with a smile.

"Oh," answered Colbert, incredulously, "I have had such good reason to know what I say is true!"

"Was true formerly?"

"Yes, and recently, at Vaux."

"People change their minds, my dear M. Colbert. What

ever the queen mother may have wished formerly, she does not wish it now."

"Why do you say that?" asked Colbert, wondering.

"The reason is of no importance."

"On the contrary, it is of very great importance, for if I were sure I should not offend the queen mother all my scruples would vanish."

"Have you ever heard any mention made of a certain secret?"

"A secret?"

"Call it what you like. In short, the queen mother has simply a horror of all who have shared in the discovery of this secret, and M. Fouquet is one of them."

"Then I might be sure of the approval of the queen mother?" asked Colbert.

"I left the queen mother a short time ago, and I know from her own lips you will have it."

"So be it, then, madame."

"Nay, more; perhaps you are acquainted with an intimate friend of M. Fouquet, M. d'Herblay, a bishop, I think?"

"Bishop of Vannes."

"Well, this M. d'Herblay also knows the secret, and the queen mother is having him pursued with the most relentless fury."

"Really?"

"So that even if he were slain, she would not be satisfied until his head was brought to her, and she was certain it could never speak again."

"This is the queen mother's wish, then?"

"Her order."

"Where do you expect me to find this M. d'Herblay, madame?"

"Oh, we know where he is."

Colbert looked at the duchess.

"Where, madame?"

"In Belle-Isle-en-Mer."

"M. Fouquet's island?"

"M. Fouquet's island."

"He shall be taken!"

It was the duchess's turn to smile.

"Do not fancy that is so easy, and do not promise it so lightly."

"Why do you say that, madame?"

"Because M. d'Herblay is not one of those persons who allow themselves to be taken without giving trouble."

"So he is a rebel?"

"Oh, M. Colbert, we have spent most of our life rebelling, and you see we have not been taken yet; on the contrary, we have been rather in the habit of taking others."

Colbert fastened on her one of those grim and enigmatical looks of his, and said, with a firmness that did not lack a certain grandeur:

"The time is past when subjects won duchies by making war on the King of France. If M. d'Herblay conspires, he will die on the scaffold. Whether this give pleasure or pain to his enemies does not concern us."

This *us*, a word so strange in the mouth of such a man as Colbert, made the duchess thoughtful. It came like a flash upon her that she herself might have to reckon with him.

Colbert had regained his superiority in the conversation; he was determined to keep it.

"You have asked me, madame," said he, "to have M. d'Herblay arrested."

"I? I have asked you nothing."

"I fancied you did. But since I am mistaken, let it pass. The King has said nothing about it."

The duchess bit her nails.

"Moreover," he continued, "what a paltry capture would be that of a mere bishop! A bishop game for a king! Oh, no, I cannot trouble my mind about him."

"Game for a woman," said she; "the queen is a woman. If she wants M. d'Herblay arrested, she has her reasons. Besides, is not M. d'Herblay the friend of the man who is about to fall?"

"Oh, that is of no consequence. The man will be spared, unless he is the King's enemy. Does that vex you?"

"Oh, I have nothing to say."

"Yes — you would like to see him in prison, in the Bastille, perhaps?"

"I think a secret better kept behind the walls of the Bastille than behind those of Belle-Isle."

"I will speak to the King; he will clear up the matter."

"And while the King is doing so, M. d'Herblay will escape. I know I should do so in similar circumstances."

"Escape! where could he escape to? Europe is ours, in will, if not in fact."

"He will always find a refuge, monsieur. It is plain to be seen you do not know the person with whom you are dealing. You were never acquainted with Aramis, and you are not acquainted with M. d'Herblay. He was one of the four musketeers who under the late King made the great cardinal himself tremble and who, during the regency, made Mazarin spend many an uneasy hour."

"But what can he do, madame, except to have a kingdom at his back?"

"He has one, monsieur."

"M. d'Herblay has a kingdom?"

"I repeat it; if he need a kingdom he will have it, or has it already."

"Well, madame, since you are so anxious that this rebel may not escape, you may take my word for it that he shall not."

"Belle-Isle is fortified, M. Colbert, fortified by him."

"That may be so, but Belle-Isle is not impregnable, and if the Bishop of Vannes chooses to shut himself up in Belle-Isle, madame, that fortress will be besieged and captured."

"You may rest assured, monsieur, that the zeal you display in the interest of the queen mother will be deeply appreciated by her Majesty and splendidly rewarded. But what am I to tell her about your plans in connection with this man?"

"Tell her that, when taken, he shall be shut up in a fortress through which her secret can never escape."

"Very well, M. Colbert. We can now say that, from this moment, we have made a solid alliance, you and I, and I am always at your service."

"Or rather, madame, I am always at yours. This Chevalier d'Herblay is a Spanish spy, is he not?"

"Better than that."

"A secret ambassador?"

"Higher still."

"Stay — Philip III. is pious. He is — his confessor?"

"Higher still."

"*Mordieu!*" cried Colbert, forgetting himself so far as to swear in the presence of this great lady, this old friend of the queen, the Duchesse de Chevreuse; "in a word, he must be the general of the Jesuits, then?"

"I fancy you have guessed correctly at last," answered the duchess.

"Ah! madame, this man will ruin us if we do not make haste and ruin him. Let us lose no time, then."

"Such was my opinion, monsieur, but I did not venture to offer it."

"It is very lucky that he attacked the throne, and not us."

"But lay this to heart, M. Colbert: M. d'Herblay is never discouraged, and if one enterprise fail with him he will at once begin another. If he has missed the opportunity of making one King, who would be his creature, he will, sooner or later, try to make another, and, assuredly, you will not be the prime minister."

"I reckon that a prison will settle the affair in a manner satisfactory to us both, madame."

The duchess smiled.

"If you knew all the prisons," said she, "out of which Aramis has broken!"

"Oh," answered Colbert, "we'll take good care that he does not break out of this one."

"Then you did not hear what I said to you a moment ago? You do not remember that Aramis was one of the four invincibles dreaded even by Richelieu? And yet at that period these four musketeers had not what they have to-day — experience and money."

Colbert bit his lips.

"We will give up the idea of a prison, then," said he, in a lower tone, "we will find a dungeon from which escape is impossible, even for an invincible."

"Capital, my honest ally! But it is getting late; don't you think it is time for us to return?"

"Yes, madame. I am the more willing to return since I have all my preparations to make for accompanying the King to Nantes."

"To Paris!" cried the duchess to the coachman.

And the carriage started in the direction of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, after the conclusion of a treaty which delivered to death the last friend of Fouquet, the last defender of Belle-Isle, the old friend of Marie Michon, the new enemy of the duchess.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE TWO GALLEYS.

D'ARTAGNAN was gone; Fouquet was gone also, and with a speed the affectionate fears of his friends were constantly accelerating.

The first moments of the superintendent's journey — or rather flight — were troubled by the terror which the sight of every horse and every carriage seen in the rear of the fugitive produced. It was not, in fact, very likely that, if Louis XIV. were determined to seize on his prey, he should let it escape. The young lion was already a good hunter, and his bloodhounds were so ardent in the chase that he could rely on them.

But little by little every apprehension vanished. The superintendent's carriage had travelled so fast, and there was soon such a distance between Fouquet and his persecutors, that none of them could be reasonably expected to overtake him. As to his position, his friends had given it the best possible color. Was he not travelling to join the King at Nantes? Did not the very speed at which he was going testify to his zeal?

He arrived, fatigued but reassured, at Orléans, where, thanks to the efforts of the courier sent in advance, he found a fine eight-oared galley ready for him. These galleys (*gabares*) shaped like gondolas, somewhat wide and heavy, having a little cabin in the form of a deck and a sort of tent on the poop, were at that time used on the Loire for carrying passengers from Orléans to Nantes. This passage, a long one at the present day, seemed then pleasanter and more comfortable than the highway with its post-hacks or clumsy carriages.

Fouquet entered the galley, which set out at once. The rowers, knowing they had the honor of having on board the superintendent of the finances, fell to with a will. The magical word, "finances," held the promise in it of a liberal gratuity which they were determined to earn.

The galley flew over the waves of the Loire. The weather was magnificent, and one of those sunrises which give a tinge of purple to the landscape revealed the river in all its limpid serenity. The current and the rowers wafted Fouquet along

as wings waft the bird ; he arrived before Beaugency without any accident occurring to mar the voyage.

Fouquet hoped to be the first to arrive at Nantes ; in that case he could visit the notables, and might gain the support of the principal members of the States ; he would make himself necessary, a thing easy enough in a man of his genius, and would retard the catastrophe, if he did not succeed in averting it entirely.

"Moreover," said Gourville, "you will be able to fathom the designs of your enemies, or, if you will not, we shall. We will have horses ready to carry us to the fastnesses of Poitou, a boat to gain the sea, and, once at sea, Belle-Isle is our inviolable port. You can see for yourself, too, that we are neither watched nor followed."

Scarcely had he finished when they descried the masts of a large galley coming down on them from behind an elbow in the river.

The rowers in Fouquet's boat raised a cry of surprise when they saw this galley.

"What is the matter ?" inquired Fouquet.

"The matter is, monseigneur," answered the skipper, "that what we see is very queer ; that boat is coming along like a hurricane."

Gourville started, and mounted on deck to get a better view.

Fouquet did not move ; but he said to Gourville, in a tone of repressed suspicion :

"Go and see what it is, my dear fellow."

The galley had just passed the bend ; it moved so fast that the white furrow of its wake could be descried, illuminated by the sunlight.

"How they fly !" exclaimed the skipper. "Those fellows must be paid well. I could never have believed that any oars in the world could match ours ; but now I see the contrary."

"I should think they would fly !" cried one of the rowers. "Why, they have twelve oars, and we have only eight."

"Twelve ?" asked Gourville ; "twelve ? Oh, impossible !"

Never before had a galley, even when bearing the King, more than eight oars.

This honor had been paid to the superintendent more for the sake of haste than out of respect.

"What does that mean?" said Gourville, vainly trying to distinguish under the tent, which could be seen already, the travellers whom even the most piercing eye could not discover as yet.

"Are n't they in a hurry! The King is not among them, though," observed the skipper.

Fouquet shuddered.

"Why do you think the King is not there?" inquired Gourville.

"Because we don't see a white flag with the fleur-de-lis; a royal galley would have it."

"And because it could not possibly be the King, for the King was in Paris yesterday," observed Fouquet.

Gourville answered with a look which said plainly:

"So were you!"

"And how do you know they are in a hurry?" he added, to gain time.

"Oh, monsieur, they must be," answered the skipper. "Those fellows set out long after us, and now they have overtaken us, or very nearly."

"Nonsense!" retorted Gourville. "How do you know but they are from Beaugency, or even from Niort?"

"You will never see a galley of that sort except at Orléans. She comes from Orléans, and she is making all the speed she can."

M. Fouquet and Gourville exchanged glances.

The skipper noticed their uneasiness. To throw him off the scent, Gourville said:

"Some friend of ours has laid a wager to catch up with us. We must bestir ourselves and win the bet."

The skipper had opened his mouth to answer that it was impossible, when Fouquet said, haughtily:

"If it be some one who wishes to come up with us let him do so."

"Still, we might try, monseigneur," replied the skipper, timidly. "Come, you fellows, bend to your oars!"

"No," ordered Fouquet; "on the contrary, stop at once."

"Monseigneur, what folly!" whispered Gourville, in his ear.

"Stop at once!" repeated Fouquet. The eight oars came to a stand. Their resistance to the water created a retrograde motion in the galley, and it stopped.

The twelve rowers in the other galley did not at first remark this manœuvre, for they continued to impel their boat with such vigor that it was soon only a musket-shot's distance. Fouquet was near-sighted, and Gourville had the sun in his eyes, but the skipper had that clearness of vision which a constant struggle with the elements gives, and he saw the faces of the travellers in the strange galley distinctly.

"I see them!" he cried; "there are two."

"I see nothing," said Gourville.

"You will after a little; a few strokes more and they will be within twenty yards of us."

But the skipper's prediction was not realized. The other galley imitated the movement of M. Fouquet's boat and stopped also in the middle of the stream.

"I don't understand this at all," muttered the skipper.

"Nor I," added Gourville.

"You seem to perceive those men very distinctly," said Fouquet to the skipper. "Describe them before we get too far away from them."

"I thought I saw two," answered the boatman, "but now I see only one under the tent."

"What does he look like?"

"He's dark, broad-shouldered, and short-necked."

At that moment a thin cloud passed over the face of the sun.

Gourville, who had his eyes constantly shaded by his hand, could now see what he was looking for. He suddenly dashed from the deck into the cabin where Fouquet was waiting for him.

"Colbert!" said he, in a voice trembling with emotion.

"Colbert?" repeated Fouquet. "That would be, indeed, strange; but no, it is impossible."

"I recognize him, I tell you, and he, too, recognized me, for he hurried at once into the chamber on the poop. Perhaps the King has sent him from Paris to bring us back."

"In that case he would come to us, instead of lying-to. What is he doing?"

"Spying on us, no doubt, monseigneur."

"I do not like uncertainty," said Fouquet. "Let us go to him."

"Oh! monseigneur, do not do that. The galley is full of armed men."

"He would arrest me, you think, Gourville? Why does he not come here, then?"

"Monseigneur, it does not become a person of your rank to run to meet his own ruin."

"But how can I suffer these fellows to watch me as if I were a malefactor?"

"There is nothing to prove they are watching you, monseigneur; have patience."

"What should I do, then?"

"Don't stop. Your reason for going so quick was prompted by anxiety to obey zealously the orders of the King. Go faster still. He who lives will see."

"You're right," cried Fouquet, "since they lie-to, let us move on."

The skipper gave the signal, and the rowers bent to their oars with all the energy to be expected from men who have had a rest. When they had made about a hundred strokes, the rowers in the other galley set to work with equal vigor.

This lasted the whole day without the distance between the two boats increasing or diminishing.

Towards nightfall Fouquet determined to make an effort to fathom the object of his persecutors. He ordered the rowers to steer for shore, as if he intended landing. Colbert's galley imitated this manœuvre, and made for the bank of the river, going in a slanting direction.

By an extraordinary coincidence, just at the spot where Fouquet pretended to be going to debark, a groom from the château of Langeais was walking along the flowery border, leading three horses by the halter. Doubtless the people in the twelve-oared boat believed that Fouquet was directing his course towards horses prepared for his flight, for four or five men, armed with muskets, leaped from the galley to the shore and marched along the slope, as if to cut off the horses from the would-be horseman.

Fouquet, satisfied with having compelled the enemy to make a demonstration, considered that he had done enough, and ordered the boat to start again on its course. Colbert's soldiers returned into theirs, and the race between the two crews went on with renewed perseverance. When Fouquet saw all this, he felt that his danger had become more imminent and threatening.

"Ah! Gourville," he whispered in a prophetic tone, "what did I say at our last banquet? Am I going to my ruin or am I not?"

"Oh! monseigneur."

"These two boats are flying over the water with as much emulation as if M. Colbert and I were racing for a prize of swiftness on the Loire. Do they not represent our respective fortunes, and do you not think, Gourville, that one of the two is likely to be shipwrecked at Nantes?"

"At least," objected Gourville, "nothing is certain yet. You will appear before the States, you will show what a man you are. Your eloquence and your genius for affairs will be the sword and buckler that will serve to defend you, if not to conquer. The Bretons do not know you. When they do your cause is won. Oh! let M. Colbert take care! His galley is as liable to sink as yours. Both of them are swift; his swifter than yours, no doubt. But we'll see which is the first likely to be wrecked!"

Taking Gourville's hand, Fouquet rejoined:

"My friend, the matter is already decided. Remember the proverb: 'First come, first served.' Well, Colbert knows better than to pass me; a prudent man is Colbert."

He was right. The two galleys headed for Nantes, watching each other. When the superintendent landed, Gourville hoped he should be able to seek a place of refuge immediately and have relays of horses ready.

But just at that moment the second galley came alongside the first, and Colbert stepped out of it and saluted Fouquet with marks of the most profound respect, marks so significant and so loudly expressed that they brought the whole population to the fosse.

Fouquet was entirely self-possessed. He felt that in these his last moments of greatness he owed a duty to himself. He wished to fall from so high an elevation that his fall should crush some of his enemies. Colbert was there; so much the worse for Colbert. The superintendent approached him with that arrogant winking of the eyes peculiar to him.

"What! you here, M. Colbert?" said he.

"To pay my respects to you, monseigneur," replied the intendant.

"You were in that galley?"

He pointed to the famous twelve-oared boat.

"Yes, monseigneur."

"A boat with twelve rowers? What magnificence, M. Colbert! For a time I was sure the King or queen mother was aboard."

"Monseigneur —"

And Colbert colored.

"Your journey will be rather costly for those who have to pay for it, monsieur," said Fouquet. "But the main point is that you have arrived. Still," he added, after a pause, "you see that I who had only eight rowers have arrived before you."

And he turned his back on him, leaving him uncertain whether all the subterfuges of the second galley had escaped the notice of the first. At any rate Fouquet would not give his enemy the satisfaction of showing that he was afraid. Colbert, although somewhat humiliated, did not show that he was disheartened either.

"I did not go very fast, monseigneur, because I desired to follow your example whenever you stopped."

"And why so, M. Colbert?" asked Fouquet, irritated at this low insolence. "Why, since you had a larger crew than I had, did you not join me or pass me?"

"Out of respect," answered the intendant, bowing to the ground.

Fouquet got into the carriage which the city had sent for him, no one knew why, and drove to the Maison de Nantes, escorted by a great crowd which had been excited for several days by the prospect of the convocation of the States. As soon as he was installed, Gourville set out to have horses stationed on the road to Vannes and Poitiers, and a boat ready at Paimbœuf. He managed these different operations with such mystery, generosity, and activity that Fouquet, who at the time had one of his fever attacks, would have been undoubtedly saved, but for the intervention of that arch disturber of human plans — Chance.

It was rumored through the city during the night that the King was speeding to Nantes on post-horses, and that he would arrive in ten or twelve hours.

The populace, while waiting for the King, were agreeably impressed by the musketeers, who had come with M. d'Artagnan,

their captain, and were quartered in the château as a guard of honor.

M. d'Artagnan, who was very polite, called on the superintendent at ten o'clock to pay him his respects, and, although the minister was in a high fever, in great pain, and bathed with perspiration, he insisted on receiving M. d'Artagnan, who appreciated the honor highly, as we shall see from the conversation they had together.

CHAPTER LXV.

A FRIEND'S ADVICE.

FOUQUET was in bed, like a man who clings to life and economizes as far as possible the slender thread of existence, the irreparable tenuity of which is so quickly worn out by the shocks and angularities of the world.

When D'Artagnan appeared on the threshold, the superintendent saluted him with a friendly "Good-morning."

"Good-morning, monseigneur," replied the musketeer. "How do you find yourself after your journey?"

"Tolerably, thank you."

"And how is the fever?"

"Bad. I drink, as you see. The first thing I did on my arrival was to levy a contribution of tisane on Nantes."

"You should sleep a good deal, monseigneur."

"*Corbleu!* my dear M. d'Artagnan, nothing would give me greater pleasure —"

"What prevents you?"

"First of all, you."

"I? Ah! monseigneur!"

"Undoubtedly. Whether in Nantes or in Paris, do you not always come in the King's name?"

"For God's sake, monseigneur, leave the King alone! Whenever I come on the part of the King to do what you hint at, I promise you there will be no beating about the bush. You will see me putting my hand to my sword, according to the regulations, and you will hear me say, in the ceremonial tones belonging to the situation: 'Monseigneur, in the King's name I arrest you!'"

The vivacious Gascon's accent was so natural and so vigorous that Fouquet started in spite of himself.

The presentation of the act was almost as terrifying as the act itself.

"You promise, then, you will be perfectly frank with me?" said the superintendent.

"On my honor! But we have n't come to that yet, believe me."

"Why do you think so, M. d'Artagnan? I think quite the contrary."

"I have n't heard a syllable that should lead me to think so," replied D'Artagnan.

"You have n't?" exclaimed Fouquet.

"No. You are a very charming person in spite of your fever. The King cannot help liking you in the bottom of his heart."

Fouquet looked as if he held a different opinion.

"But M. Colbert?" said he. "Does M. Colbert like me also?"

"I am not talking of M. Colbert," answered D'Artagnan. "He is a rather peculiar personage, is M. Colbert! It is very possible he does not like you; but *mordoux*! the squirrel can always keep clear of the snake with very little trouble."

"Are you aware that you are speaking to me as a friend, and that never in my life have I found a man with such a mind and heart as yours?"

"You are pleased to say so," returned D'Artagnan. "Why did you wait till to-day to pay me this compliment?"

"Blind fools that we are!" murmured Fouquet.

"You are growing hoarse," said D'Artagnan; "drink, mon-seigneur, drink."

He offered him a cup of tisane with the most friendly cordiality. Fouquet took it, and thanked him with a smile.

"These things happen to nobody but me," said the musketeer. "I have passed ten years under your very beard, when you were rolling about hogsheads of gold. You were making four millions a year and you never noticed me. And now you take note of my existence, at the very moment —"

"When I am about to fall. True, my dear M. d'Artagnan," interrupted Fouquet.

"I did not say so."

"But you thought it, which is pretty much the same. Well, if I fall — believe me, I am speaking the truth — I shall not let a single day pass without striking my forehead and saying:

Fool! fool! stupid fool! You had a D'Artagnan under your hand and you did not make use of him! You did not enrich him!"

"You overwhelm me!" said the captain; "but I have always had a sincere liking for you."

"Another man who is not of the same mind as M. Colbert," returned the superintendent.

"Why, this Colbert is a very thorn in your side! he is worse than your fever!"

"You may well say so. But I'll let you judge for yourself."

And he related all the incidents of the race of the two galleys and the hypocritical persecution of Colbert.

"Is that not an evident proof that I am ruined?"

D'Artagnan became grave.

"You are right," said he; "that has a bad smell, as M. de Tréville used to say."

And he fastened on Fouquet a look that was significant as well as intelligent.

"Do you not see, then, that I am in a critical position, captain? Is it not plain that the King has brought me to Nantes from Paris, where I have so many friends, because he wants to isolate me and seize Belle-Isle?"

"Where M. d'Herblay is," added D'Artagnan.

Fouquet looked up.

"As far as I am concerned," continued D'Artagnan, "I can assure you that the King has never said a word against you."

"Really?"

"It is true the King ordered me to ride to Nantes, but to say nothing about it to M. de Gesvres."

"My friend."

"To M. de Gesvres, yes, monseigneur," went on the musketeer, the language of whose eyes was very different from the language of his lips. "The King further ordered me to take a brigade of musketeers, for no reason that I can see, since the country is perfectly quiet."

"A brigade?" said Fouquet, rising on his elbow.

"Of ninety-six horse, yes, monseigneur; the number employed in arresting M. de Chalais, M. de Cinq-Mars, and M. de Montmorency."

Fouquet pricked up his ears at the mention of these names, which were thrown out in an apparently off-hand way by D'Artagnan.

"Anything else?" said he.

"Oh, nothing of importance; a few trivial commands, such as 'Guard the château; station guards before every suite of apartments; and see that none of M. de Gesvres' guards are used for this purpose.' M. de Gesvres is your friend, I believe?"

"And what orders have you received in my regard?" cried Fouquet.

"None, monseigneur; I have not heard even a word about you."

"M. d'Artagnan, my life and honor are both at stake, perhaps; you would not deceive me?"

"Eh? Why should I? Surely you are in no danger? I may remark that there is also an order relating to carriages and boats —"

"An order?"

"Yes. It cannot concern you, of course. A simple measure of police."

"What is it, captain? what is it?"

"To prevent all horses and boats from leaving Nantes except on a pass signed by the King."

"Good God! why —"

D'Artagnan laughed.

"The order will not be in force before the King's arrival; so you perceive, monseigneur, it has nothing to do with you."

Fouquet sank into a gloomy reverie; D'Artagnan pretended not to notice it.

"Nothing but my affection for you induces me to confide to you the orders I have received. I wish to prove that none of them can be directed against you."

"I have no doubt of it," answered Fouquet, in an absent way.

"Let us go over them again," said D'Artagnan, with a glance full of meaning. "The château where you are to lodge, I think, is to be specially and rigidly guarded. You are acquainted with this château, are you not? M. de Gesvres is to be got rid of — he has the honor to be one of your friends? The gates of the river and city are to be closed to every one who has not a pass. These orders are not to be put in force, however, before the King arrives. Do you know, M. Fouquet, that if, instead of addressing you, one of the first men in the realm, I were speaking to a man with an uneasy conscience, I should be forever compromised? What a splen-

did chance for any one who thought the best thing he could do would be to sheer off! No police, no guards, no orders, a free highway, and a free water-course; M. d'Artagnan obliged to lend his horses as soon as they are demanded! Certainly, all this ought to reassure you, M. Fouquet. The King would never have left me so independent if he had any evil intentions in your regard. So, M. Fouquet, you can ask me for anything you like. I am entirely at your service; but you will please render me a service in turn; you will give my compliments to Aramis and Porthos, in case you start for Belle-Isle, which you have a perfect right to do, and that, too, just as you, are in your morning gown, without taking time to change your dress even."

With these words, and with a profound inclination, the musketeer, who had never taken his keen and friendly eyes off Fouquet's countenance, passed out of the room and disappeared.

He had not reached the steps of the vestibule, when the superintendent, in a state of great agitation, rang the bell violently, and shouted:

"My horses! my galley!"

There was no answer.

The superintendent dressed, taking any article he found to his hand.

"Gourville! Gourville!" he cried, slipping a watch into his pocket.

He rang the bell again, repeating:

"Gourville! Gourville!"

Gourville entered, pale, gasping for breath.

"Let us get away at once!" cried the superintendent as soon as he saw him.

"Too late! too late!" replied poor Fouquet's friend.

"Too late! why?"

"Listen!"

A flourish of trumpets and a roll of drums could be heard from the court in front of the château.

"What is that, Gourville?"

"The King has arrived, monseigneur."

"The King?"

"The King, who has passed through without stopping, killed a number of horses, and is now here eight hours before the time you calculated on."

"We are lost!" murmured Fouquet. "D'Artagnan, my honest friend, you spoke too late!"

There was no doubt about it. The King was in the city ; soon the cannon were thundering from the ramparts, and were being answered by a salute from the guns on a vessel in the river.

Fouquet knitted his temples, summoned his valets, and had himself dressed in ceremonial costume. Standing behind the curtains of his window, he remarked the enthusiasm of the crowds and the presence of a large troop, which had followed the prince, no one could tell why.

The King was escorted to the château with great pomp, and Fouquet saw him dismount under the portcullis and whisper to D'Artagnan, who was holding his stirrups.

When the King had entered D'Artagnan directed his steps towards the residence of Fouquet, but so slowly, so very slowly, halting so often to speak to his musketeers, who were drawn up in line, that it looked as if he were counting the minutes or his footsteps before he gave his message. When he was in the court, Fouquet opened the window for the purpose of speaking to him.

"Ah!" cried D'Artagnan, when he perceived him; "you here *still*, monseigneur!"

This little adverb, *still*, was enough of itself to prove to the superintendent what sound information and advice had been given him during the musketeer's first visit.

Fouquet simply heaved a sigh.

"Alas! yes, monsieur," he answered; "the King's arrival has interrupted all my plans."

"Ah! you know of the King's arrival?"

"I have seen it, monsieur, and now you have come by his order to—"

"To inquire after your health, monseigneur, and if it is not too bad, to beg you to have the kindness to come to the château."

"At once, M. d'Artagnan, at once."

"Upon my word," observed the captain, "now that the King is here, there is no more walking for anybody, no more freedom. The general regulations are in authority over every one at present, over you as well as me, over me as well as you."

Fouquet sighed for the last time, entered a carriage, for he was too weak to ride, and drove to the château, attended by D'Artagnan, whose politeness was as alarming now as it had before been consoling.

CHAPTER LXVI.

HOW KING LOUIS PLAYED HIS LITTLE PART.

WHILE Fouquet was descending from his carriage, for the purpose of entering the château, a man in the garb of the common people approached him with great respect and handed him a letter.

D'Artagnan tried to prevent this man from holding any communication with Fouquet, and drove him away, but not before the superintendent had received the letter. Fouquet broke the seal and read it. A vague terror, the cause of which D'Artagnan easily comprehended, was depicted on the prime minister's face. Fouquet placed the letter in the portfolio he carried under his arm, and continued on his way to the King's apartments.

D'Artagnan, who went up behind him, looked through one of the little windows on the several landings of the donjon, and saw the man who had brought the note looking round the square and making signals to a number of persons, who then vanished into the adjacent streets, after making similar signals to this individual.

Fouquet had to wait a few moments on the terrace abutting on the little corridor leading to the royal cabinet.

D'Artagnan passed the superintendent, whom he had respectfully followed until now, and entered the King's apartment.

"Well?" inquired Louis XIV., who, as soon as he perceived him, threw a green cloth over some papers on the table.

"The order has been executed, Sire."

"And Fouquet?"

"M. le Surintendant has come with me, Sire," replied D'Artagnan.

"Let him be shown in in ten minutes," said Louis, dismissing D'Artagnan with a gesture.

The musketeer passed out, but he had hardly reached the spot where Fouquet was waiting for him when the King's bell recalled him.

"Did he not seem astonished?" asked Louis.

"Who, Sire?"

"Fouquet," repeated the King, without the "monsieur," an omission which confirmed D'Artagnan in his suspicions.

"No, Sire," he answered.

"Good."

And for the second time Louis dismissed D'Artagnan.

Fouquet had not quitted the terrace where his conductor had left him. He read his letter over again. These were the contents :

"Some strange plot or other has been hatched against you. Perhaps they will not venture on anything at the château. They will when you return home. Your lodgings are surrounded by musketeers. Do not enter. A white horse is waiting for you behind the Esplanade."

M. Fouquet had recognized the handwriting of the devoted Gourville. And, not wishing, if any misfortune befell him, that this paper should compromise a faithful friend, he tore it into a number of little bits, which were soon carried by the wind across the railing of the terrace.

D'Artagnan surprised him watching the last scraps fluttering through space.

"Monsieur," said he, "the King expects you."

Fouquet walked with great deliberation into the little corridor in which M. de Brienne and M. Rose were working, while the Duc de Saint-Aignan, who was also sitting in the corridor, seemed to be waiting for orders and was yawning impatiently, his sword between his legs.

Fouquet thought it singular that Brienne, Rose, and Saint-Aignan, ordinarily so attentive and obsequious, should hardly put themselves out of the way to show him, the superintendent, any respect now. But what could be expected from courtiers by a man whom the King called simply "Fouquet" ?

He raised his head, and with a determination to face everything, entered the cabinet, where a little bell, with which we are already acquainted, announced him to his Majesty.

The King nodded, but did not rise. He said, however, with some interest :

"Ah, how are you, M. Fouquet ?"

"I am in a high fever at present, but always at the service of the King," replied the superintendent.

"Good. The States assemble to-morrow. Have you a speech prepared ?"

Fouquet stared at the King in amazement.

"No, Sire," he answered. "But I will improvise one. I

have a sufficient knowledge of the matters in hand to be able to do so without much trouble. I should, however, like to ask your Majesty a question. Will you be graciously pleased to permit me to do so ? ”

“ You have my permission.”

“ Why did your Majesty not do your chief minister the honor of giving him notice of this in Paris ? ”

“ You were ill ; I did not wish to fatigue you.”

“ Never yet has any kind of labor fatigued me — an explanation, then, will not fatigue me ; and since the time has come for me to ask an explanation from my King — ”

“ Oh ! M. Fouquet ! an explanation as to what ? ”

“ As to the intentions of your Majesty in my regard.”

The King reddened.

“ I have been calumniated,” continued Fouquet, warmly, “ and I have a right to ask the King to have an inquiry made into the facts.”

“ What you say, M. Fouquet, is useless ; I know what I know.”

“ Your Majesty can know only what you have been told. I have said nothing, while others have spoken again and again to — ”

“ What do you mean ? ” asked the King, impatient to bring this embarrassing conversation to an end.

“ I will go straight to the point, Sire, and I will accuse a certain man of injuring me in your Majesty’s good opinion.”

“ Nobody has been injuring you, M. Fouquet.”

“ Your answer, Sire, proves that I am right.”

“ M. Fouquet, I do not like to have persons making accusations.”

“ Even when they themselves are accused ! ”

“ We have talked enough about this affair.”

“ Your Majesty will not hear my defence ? ”

“ I repeat that I do not accuse you.”

Fouquet, with a half bow, made a step backward.

“ He has made up his mind, evidently,” he thought. “ He feels there is no retreat left or he would not be so obstinate. Not to see the danger at the present moment would be to be blind ; not to avoid it would be to be stupid.”

Then he remarked aloud :

“ Did your Majesty send for me because you have some task to assign me ? ”

"No, monsieur, but to give you a piece of advice."

"I await it respectfully, Sire."

"Take a rest, M. Fouquet; do not waste your strength. The session of the States will be short, and when my secretaries have closed it, I do not care to have business talked of for the next fortnight afterward."

"The King has nothing to say to me on the subject of this assembly of the States?"

"No, M. Fouquet."

"Nothing to me, the superintendent of the finances?"

"Take a rest, I entreat you; that is all I have to say to you."

Fouquet bit his lips and hung his head. He was evidently brooding over some painful thought.

His uneasiness communicated itself to the King.

"Are you annoyed because I have asked you to take a rest, M. Fouquet?" said he.

"Yes, Sire; I am not accustomed to repose."

"But you are sick and must take care of yourself."

"Did your Majesty speak of a speech I was to deliver to-morrow?"

The King did not answer. This unexpected question embarrassed him.

Fouquet felt the full force of this hesitation. He fancied he could read in the eyes of the young prince that if he exhibited any distrust, the danger that was threatening him would rush down upon him at once.

"If I show fear," he thought, "I am lost."

The King, on the other hand, was rendered uneasy by the suspicion that Fouquet distrusted him.

"Has he got wind of anything?" he wondered.

"If his first words be harsh," pondered Fouquet, "if he is irritated or feigns irritation for an object, how shall I extricate myself? Well! better to try, at least, to render the fall as easy as possible. Gourville was right."

"Sire," said he suddenly, "since your Majesty, in your great kindness, is so watchful over my health as to release me from all labor, will you dispense me from attendance at to-morrow's council? I could thus spend the day in bed, and perhaps your Majesty would be good enough to send me your physician, who might find a remedy for this wretched fever."

"Your request is granted, M. Fouquet. You shall have a

holiday to-morrow, a doctor, and I hope your health restored also."

"Thank you, Sire," answered Fouquet, inclining.

Then, taking a decisive step:

"Shall I not have the pleasure," said he, "of conducting your Majesty to my house at Belle-Isle?"

He looked Louis full in the face, to judge of the effect of his proposal.

Louis reddened a second time.

"Are you aware," answered the King, making an effort to smile, "that you have just said: 'My house at Belle-Isle'?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And do you not remember," continued Louis, in the same playful tone, "that you have given me Belle-Isle?"

"Yes, Sire. But you have not yet taken possession of it."

"I am resolved to do so."

"Yes, it was your Majesty's resolution as well as mine that you should do so, and I cannot express to your Majesty my pride and pleasure in seeing that your Majesty's entire military household has accompanied you for the purpose of assisting you to take possession of Belle-Isle."

The King stammered that he had not brought his musketeers with him for this purpose alone.

"Oh, I am aware of that," said Fouquet, earnestly; "your Majesty knows too well that if you came to Belle-Isle by yourself, with only a cane in your hand, at a word from you all its fortifications would fall to the ground."

"*Peste!*" cried the King, "I am not at all desirous that all these fine fortifications which it took so much money to build should fall. No, no! let them stand against the Dutch and English. You will, perhaps, never guess, M. Fouquet, what I am particularly anxious to see at Belle-Isle; I wish to see the beautiful peasant girls who dance so gracefully and are so ravishing in their scarlet petticoats. I have heard those fair vassals of yours highly spoken of, M. Fouquet. You must show them to me."

"Whenever your Majesty pleases."

"Have you any means of transport? We'll go to-morrow, if you like."

It was a thrust, but not a skilful one. The superintendent parried it by answering:

"No, Sire. I was in ignorance of your Majesty's intentions.

I was ignorant, especially, of your hurry to visit Belle-Isle, and so I did not make any preparations."

"You have a boat, however?"

"I have five; but they are all either at Le Port or Paimbœuf, and it would require twenty-four hours, at the very least, to get them together, or bring them here. Shall I despatch a courier for them?"

"Wait a while. First get well of your fever. Better wait till to-morrow."

"True. Who knows but that to-morrow we may have other ideas?" answered Fouquet, who was very pale and knew now what he had to expect.

The King started, and stretched his hand to the bell, but Fouquet prevented him from touching it.

"Sire," said he, "I am trembling with fever and cold. If I remain a moment longer, I am likely to faint. Will your Majesty permit me to withdraw and hide myself under the bedclothes?"

"Yes, I perceive you are shivering. It is a painful sight. Go, M. Fouquet, go. I will send to inquire after you."

"Your Majesty overwhelms me. I expect to be much better in an hour."

"I wish to have some one accompany you to your lodgings," said the King.

"Just as you please, Sire. I should be very glad to take some person's arm."

"M. d'Artagnan!" cried the King, touching the bell.

"Oh! Sire," interrupted Fouquet, with a laugh that chilled the heart of the prince, "are you giving me a captain of musketeers as an escort? It is a very equivocal honor, Sire! A simple footman will do for me, if you please, Sire."

"And why, M. Fouquet? M. d'Artagnan has often escorted me, and certainly to my perfect satisfaction."

"But when he did so, Sire, he was simply obeying you, while —"

"Well?"

"If I must return to my lodgings, escorted by the chief of your musketeers, every one will say that you have had me arrested."

"Arrested?" repeated the King, paler than Fouquet himself, "arrested? ah!"

"Eh! why should not every one say so, Sire?" continued

Fouquet, still laughing; "and I would lay a wager there would be found people malicious enough to laugh at it!"

This sally disconcerted the monarch. Fouquet had been clever enough or lucky enough to make Louis XIV. recoil before the mere counterfeit presentment of the deed he was meditating. When D'Artagnan made his appearance he was ordered to select one of his musketeers to accompany M. Fouquet.

"It is not necessary," said the superintendent. "I prefer Gourville, who is waiting for me below. But this will not hinder me from enjoying the companionship of M. d'Artagnan. I am very glad he is going to see Belle-Isle, as he is so thoroughly acquainted with fortifications."

D'Artagnan, who could make nothing of the scene, bowed. Fouquet also saluted and withdrew, affecting all the slowness of a man who finds walking painful.

Once outside the château:

"Saved!" he cried. "Ah! yes, faithless king, thou shalt see Belle-Isle, but only when I am no longer there!"

And he disappeared.

D'Artagnan had remained with the King.

"Captain," said Louis, "you will follow M. Fouquet, keeping a hundred paces behind him."

"Yes, Sire."

"He is returning home. You will go there."

"Yes, Sire."

"You will arrest him in my name, and shut him up in a carriage."

"In a carriage? Very well."

"And you will see to it that on the route he does not converse with any one, or throw notes to any person he may chance to meet."

"Oh, that is by no means easy, Sire."

"Yes, it is."

"Excuse me, Sire. I cannot stifle M. Fouquet, and if he insists on being allowed to breathe I cannot hinder him from doing so by closing the windows and blinds. He will be able to shout through the portières and throw as many notes as he likes through them also."

"All that has been anticipated, M. d'Artagnan. A carriage with an iron trellis will get rid of the two difficulties you mention."

"A carriage with an iron trellis!" cried D'Artagnan. "But a trellis can't be made in half an hour, and your Majesty desires me to go to M. Fouquet's at once."

"For which reason the carriage in question is already prepared."

"Oh, that's different," answered the captain. "If the carriage is all ready, very good; all we have to do is to make it go."

"The horses are put to."

"Ah!"

"And the coachman and outriders are waiting in the lower court of the château."

D'Artagnan bowed.

"Then all I have to ask your Majesty is to name the place to which I am to conduct M. Fouquet."

"First to the château of Angers."

"Very well."

"Then — we'll see."

"Yes, Sire."

"M. d'Artagnan, a last word. You have noticed that I do not employ my guards in making this arrest, and therefore M. de Gesvres is sure to be furious."

"Your Majesty does not employ your guards," retorted D'Artagnan, somewhat humiliated, "because you distrust M. de Gesvres; that is the root of the matter!"

"Which means, monsieur, that I have perfect confidence in you."

"Oh, I am well aware of that, Sire, and there is no use in making so much noise about it."

"I mention it as a preliminary to saying, monsieur, that if M. Fouquet should, by any chance, by any chance whatever, effect his escape — we have seen such things happen —"

"Very often, Sire, in the case of others, never in mine."

"Why not in yours?"

"Because, Sire, there was a moment when I wished to save M. Fouquet."

The King started.

"I had a perfect right to do so at the time," continued the captain, "since your Majesty had not communicated your intention to me. I surmised it, however, and I took an interest in M. Fouquet. Then I was free, under the circumstances, to give proof of my interest in this man."

"Upon my word, monsieur, I have some reason to have doubts as to your perfect loyalty in the performance of your duties!"

"Oh, no! If I had saved him then, it would have been an innocent act on my part. Nay, more, it would have been a meritorious act, for M. Fouquet is not a wicked man. But he would not have it; his destiny has forced him along; he has let the hour of freedom escape him. So much the worse for him! Now I have orders; I will obey these orders, and you may consider M. Fouquet as already arrested, you may consider him as already in the *château* of Angers."

"Oh, you have not got him yet, captain!"

"That's my business; every one to his trade, Sire. Only reflect once more. Do you seriously give me the order to arrest M. Fouquet, Sire?"

"Yes, a thousand times yes!"

"Then write it, Sire."

"Here is the order."

D'Artagnan read it, saluted the King, and passed out. Looking from the terrace, he perceived Gourville, who had quite a joyous air, and was going in the direction of M. Fouquet's lodgings.

CHAPTER LXVII.

THE WHITE HORSE AND THE BLACK HORSE.

"THIS is rather surprising," said the captain to himself. "Here we have Gourville looking quite gay and running through the streets at the very moment when it is pretty certain that Fouquet is in the greatest peril, and when it is equally certain that it was Gourville who warned Fouquet by means of the letter, that letter which was torn up into a thousand scraps on the terrace and given to the winds by M. le Surintendant."

"Gourville is rubbing his hands. He must have done something clever, then. Where is Gourville coming from? Gourville is coming from the *Rue aux Herbes*. Where does the *Rue aux Herbes* lead to?"

D'Artagnan followed, over the roofs of the houses commanded by the *château*, the lines traced by the streets as he would have followed the lines on a topographical chart. But

instead of flat, dull paper, the living chart before him stood out in bold relief with the shadows, cries, and movements of men and things.

Beyond the city walls the great verdant plains stretched as far as the Loire, and seemed to be running towards the purple horizon, which was cut by the azure of the waters and the dark green of the marshes.

Just outside the city gates two white roads began to diverge, like the widespread fingers of some gigantic hand.

D'Artagnan, whose eyes, as he crossed the terrace, had embraced the whole panorama, was conducted by the line of the Rue aux Herbes along one of these roads, running from the gate of Nantes.

He was about to descend from the terrace, take his trellised carriage, and drive to Fouquet's lodgings. But just at the moment when he had his foot on the first step of the staircase, his attention was drawn to a moving point that was passing with great swiftness over this highway.

"What can it be?" he wondered. "A galloping horse, a runaway horse, very likely; how it does scamper along!"

The moving point turned aside, and entered a field of lucerne.

"Ah! a white horse," continued the captain, who had just perceived the color standing out brightly against a dark background. "Some boy whose horse is thirsty taking a short cut to the watering-place."

These reflections, rapid as lightning, simultaneous with visual perception, had already passed away from D'Artagnan's mind when he began descending the staircase a second time.

Some scraps of paper were lying on the steps, and came out distinctly on the black stones.

"Eh!" muttered the captain, "fragments of the letter torn by M. Fouquet! Poor fellow! he gave his secret to the winds; the winds would have nothing to do with it, and brought it to the King. Decidedly, my poor Fouquet, you are too unlucky! the game is not fair; fortune is against you. The star of Louis XIV. obscures yours, the snake has either more strength or more cleverness than the squirrel."

D'Artagnan, without stopping, picked up one of the pieces. "Gourville's little hand!" he exclaimed, inspecting it; "I was not mistaken."

And he read the word "*horse*."

“Aha!” he cried.

He examined another; there was no writing on it.

On a third he read the word “*white*.”

“*White horse*,” he repeated, after the manner of a child spelling.

“Zounds!” murmured this man of the suspicious mind; “a white horse!”

And like that grain of powder which, being set on fire, catches every other grain in the magazine, this idea of D’Artagnan pounced upon all his other ideas and suspicions. He turned round and went swiftly back to the terrace. The white horse was galloping in the direction of the Loire, at the extremity of which, blending with the vapors of the waters, a little sail appeared, dancing about like an atom.

“Oho!” cried the musketeer, “there is only one man who would gallop so fast over ploughed lands. Only a Fouquet, a financier, would gallop in this fashion in full daylight, and on a white horse. Only the lord of Belle-Isle would escape to the seacoast when there are so many thick forests on land; and there is only one D’Artagnan in the world to catch M. Fouquet, who has a start of half an hour, and who, if not prevented, will be in his boat in another hour.”

Whereupon the musketeer ordered the trellised carriage to be taken at once outside the city and hidden in a little grove near the walls. He selected his best steed, jumped on his back, and galloped through the Rue aux Herbes, taking, not the road by which Fouquet had gone, but the bank of the Loire itself, certain that he should thus make a gain of ten minutes, and at the intersection of the two lines, come up with the fugitive, who would never suspect that he was being pursued from that direction.

What with the fleetness of the pursuit and the impatience of the pursuer, who grew as excited as if he were engaged in war or the chase, our D’Artagnan, lately so kind and gentle towards Fouquet, had become ferocious and almost sanguinary.

For a long time he galloped on without catching sight of the white horse; his fury took on the complexion of madness; he began to have doubts of himself; he imagined that Fouquet had plunged into some subterranean road, or had changed his white horse for one of those famous black chargers, swift as the wind, which D’Artagnan had once admired and envied at Saint-Mandé for their buoyancy and vigor.

At such moments, what with the wind stinging his eyes and making the tears start, the saddle burning hot, the galled and bleeding horse bellowing with pain and throwing up showers of fine sand and pebbles behind him, and what with seeing nothing on the water or under the trees when he stood up in his stirrups, D'Artagnan was like one possessed. He looked up in the air to see if Fouquet might not be in that direction; he was really losing his mind. In his ravenous hunger for his prey he dreamed of aerial pathways, a discovery of the following century; he recalled Dædalus and the vast wings that had enabled him to escape from the prisons of Crete.

A hoarse sigh broke from his lips. Devoured by the fear of ridicule, he repeated again and again:

"I! I! to be duped by a Gourville! I — it will be said I am growing old; it will be said I got a million for letting Fouquet escape!"

And he plunged the rowels still deeper into the horse's flanks. He had galloped nearly a league in two minutes. Suddenly, at the end of an open pasture-field, behind a hedge, he perceived a white form which appeared for a moment, then disappeared, and at last remained distinctly visible upon a rising ground.

D'Artagnan was ready to leap with joy. He regained all his usual composure on the spot. He brushed away the sweat that was rolling down his forehead, relaxed the tension of his knees, thus allowing his horse to breathe more freely, and, pulling back the reins, moderated the speed of the vigorous animal, his partner in this man-hunt. He had now time to examine the road and his position in relation to Fouquet.

The superintendent had winded his white horse by galloping over these ploughed lands, and, feeling the need of a firmer footing, was taking the shortest way to the road. All D'Artagnan had to do in order to cut him off from the highway was to ride along the foot of a cliff which would conceal him from his enemy. Then the real chase would begin; then would come the critical moment of the struggle.

D'Artagnan gave his black horse good breathing time. He noticed that the gallop of the superintendent changed to a trot, which proved that he, too, was giving his steed breathing-time. But both pursuer and pursued were in too great a hurry to continue at this pace. The white horse went off like a shot the moment his feet touched firmer ground.

D'Artagnan dropped his hand, and his black charger broke into a gallop. Both followed the same direction; the echoes of the hoof-beats of their coursers were confounded in one and the same sound, and Fouquet had not yet perceived D'Artagnan.

But when D'Artagnan passed beyond the cliff, a single echo struck the ear; it was that of the musketeer's steed rolling along like thunder. Fouquet turned; a hundred yards behind him, he perceived his enemy bending over his horse's neck. Doubt was impossible; the gleaming baldrick and red tunic proclaimed the musketeer. Fouquet slackened the reins and put twenty yards more between himself and his pursuer.

D'Artagnan grew uneasy.

"Ah!" he said to himself, "that is not an ordinary horse that Fouquet is riding; let me think."

And he scrutinized intently, with those infallible eyes of his, the shape and capabilities of the courser. Round, full quarters, a thin, long tail, large hocks, thin legs, as dry as bars of steel, hoofs as hard as marble. He dug the spurs into his own beast, but the distance between himself and his antagonist remained the same. He listened eagerly; not a breathing of the horse reached him, and yet the animal seemed to cut the air. On the other hand, his own horse was blowing like a blacksmith's bellows.

"I must come up with him, though I kill my horse," thought the musketeer; and he began to saw the poor beast's mouth, while at the same time burying the pitiless spurs in his flanks.

The maddened horse gained fifty yards, and came within pistol-shot of Fouquet.

"Courage!" whispered the musketeer to himself, "courage, the white horse is growing weak; and, if the horse do not fall the rider is sure to fall in the end."

But horse and rider remained both upright, and were gradually gaining the advantage.

"What a horse! and what a rider!" growled the captain. "Halt, I say! halt, *mordoux*! in the King's name!"

No answer from Fouquet.

"Do you hear me?" howled D'Artagnan.

His horse made a false step.

"*Pardieu*!" was the laconic reply.

And Fouquet galloped more madly than ever.

D'Artagnan was losing his senses; the boiling blood surged to his eyes and temples.

"Stop, in the King's name!" he shouted, "stop, or I'll bring you down with my pistol."

"Do so," Fouquet answered back, never relaxing his speed.

D'Artagnan seized a pistol and cocked it, hoping that the noise of the spring would bring him to a stand.

"You have pistols also," said he; "defend yourself."

Fouquet had, in fact, heard the noise; he turned round, and looking D'Artagnan full in the face, opened his tunic and bared his breast; but he did not touch the holsters.

There were about twenty paces between them.

"*Mordious!*" cried D'Artagnan, "I cannot assassinate you; if you will not fire on me, surrender! After all, what is a prison?"

"Death, rather," replied Fouquet; "the suffering would be less."

Drunk with despair, D'Artagnan flung away his pistol.

"I will take you alive," said he.

And, by a marvellous feat, of which no one but this incomparable cavalier was capable, he drove his steed within ten paces of the white horse. His hand was already stretched out to seize his prey.

"Kill me!" said Fouquet, "it will be more humane."

"No, alive, alive!" murmured the captain.

His horse stumbled again, and again Fouquet had the advantage. An unheard of spectacle was the race between these two horses, kept alive by the determination of their riders. To the headlong gallop had succeeded a rapid trot, then this trot changed to almost a walking pace. But although these two men of iron were exhausted, the chase seemed to them as warm as ever.

D'Artagnan, driven to extremity, seized his second pistol and aimed at the white horse.

"At your horse, not at you," he shouted.

And he fired. The animal, hit on the hind quarter, made a furious bound, and reared.

D'Artagnan's horse fell dead.

"I am dishonored," muttered the musketeer, "I am a wretch. For mercy's sake, M. Fouquet, throw me one of your pistols and let me blow my brains out!"

But Fouquet rode on.

"Do so, in the name of all you hold dear," cried D'Artagnan. "What you refuse to do now, I will do within an hour. But if I die here, on this highway, I die respected. Do me this service, M. Fouquet."

Fouquet continued his course without answering.

D'Artagnan started on his feet after his enemy. One after another, he flung away his hat, his tunic, — they embarrassed him, — the scabbard of his sword — it had got between his legs. Then his sword became too heavy; he flung that away, too. The white horse began to rattle in its throat, and D'Artagnan was gaining. From a trot the exhausted animal passed to a staggering walk; his head was quivering; the foam from his mouth was tinged with blood.

With a desperate effort D'Artagnan leaped at Fouquet, seized his leg, and gasped out:

"I arrest you in the King's name. Blow my brains out; in any case, we have both done our duty."

Fouquet flung into the river the two pistols which D'Artagnan might have seized, and, jumping to the ground:

"I am your prisoner, monsieur," said he. "Take my arm, you are ready to faint."

"Thank you," murmured D'Artagnan, who, in fact, felt as if the ground were giving way under him and the sky rushing down on his head.

He rolled upon the sand, breathless, paralyzed.

Fouquet descended the slope, filled his hat with water, bathed the musketeer's temples, and forced a few drops of water between his lips. D'Artagnan rose and looked around him with a stupefied gaze. He saw Fouquet kneeling, his wet hat in his hand, smiling on him with ineffable gentleness.

"And you have not fled!" he cried. "Oh, monsieur, as far as heart, soul, and loyalty go, the real King is not Louis of the Louvre, or Philippe of Sainte-Marguerite, but you, the outlawed, the condemned!"

"I whom a single fault has ruined to-day, M. d'Artagnan."

"In God's name, what fault?"

"That of not having made you my friend. But how are we to get back to Nantes? We are very far away from it."

"You are right," answered D'Artagnan, dejectedly.

"The white horse may come to, perhaps; he was such a splendid animal! Mount him, M. d'Artagnan. I will walk until you are somewhat better."

"Poor beast! and wounded, too!" sighed the musketeer.

"Oh, he will manage it, I know him. But we can do better than that, we can both mount him."

"Well, let us try it," replied the captain.

But as soon as they were on his back he staggered, recovered, walked for a few minutes, staggered again, and fell down beside the black horse, just as he came up with him.

"We must go on foot, it is fate's decree. Fortunately the road is excellent," said Fouquet, giving D'Artagnan his arm.

"*Mordieux!*" cried the musketeer, with haggard eyes, drawn features, and a heart swollen almost to bursting, "what a shameful day!"

Slowly they made their way to the spot where the carriage and escort were waiting for them behind the wood, twelve miles distant.

When Fouquet saw the sinister machine, he said to D'Artagnan, who had his eyes cast down, as if ashamed of his sovereign :

"An idea of that sort never took root in the soul of an honorable man, certainly not in yours, Captain D'Artagnan. What are those gratings for?"

"To prevent you from throwing notes out."

"How ingenious!"

"But you can speak if you cannot write," answered D'Artagnan.

"Speak to you?"

"Yes — if you like."

Fouquet mused a moment; then, looking the captain full in the face:

"Just a word. Will you bear it in mind?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And will you convey it to the person I wish?"

"I will."

"Saint-Mandé!" whispered Fouquet.

"Good. For whom?"

"For Madame de Bellière or Pélisson."

"It shall be done."

The carriage passed through Nantes, and took the route to Angers.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

IN WHICH THE SQUIRREL FALLS AND THE SNAKE FLIES.

It was two in the afternoon. The King went frequently from his cabinet to the terrace, and sometimes opened the door of the corridor to see what his secretaries were doing.

M. Colbert, who sat in the same place where M. de Saint-Aignan had sat so long in the morning, was talking in a low voice with M. de Brienne.

The King abruptly opened the door.

"What are you speaking about?" he inquired.

"We were speaking of the first session of the States," said M. de Brienne, rising.

"Very well," rejoined the King.

And he went in again.

Five minutes later, a tap on the bell summoned Rose, whose hour it was.

"Have you finished your copies?" asked the King.

"Not yet, Sire."

"See if M. d'Artagnan has returned."

"Not yet, Sire."

"Strange!" muttered the King. "Call M. Colbert."

Colbert entered. He had been waiting ever since morning for this.

"M. Colbert," said Louis, sharply, "I must really know what has become of M. d'Artagnan."

Colbert answered with his usual composure:

"Where would your Majesty have me search for him?"

"What, monsieur! Don't you know where I sent him?" replied the King, sourly.

"Your Majesty did not tell me."

"Monsieur, there are things that ought to be guessed at, especially by you."

"I might have formed a conjecture, Sire; but I could not take the liberty of going further than a conjecture."

Almost before Colbert had finished speaking, a voice rougher than the King's interrupted the conversation between the monarch and the clerk.

"D'Artagnan!" cried the King, joyfully.

D'Artagnan, pale and furiously angry, said to the King:

"Sire, was it your Majesty that gave certain orders to my musketeers?"

"What orders?" asked the King.

"Relating to M. Fouquet's house."

"I have given none," returned the King.

"Ah! ah!" exclaimed D'Artagnan, biting his mustache: "I was not mistaken; it was this gentleman."

And he pointed to Colbert.

"What orders are you speaking about?" said the King.

"Orders to turn an entire house upside down, to beat M. Fouquet's officials and servants, force drawers, and sack a peaceful dwelling. *Mordieux!* an order fit for a savage to give!"

"Monsieur!" — returned Colbert, turning very pale.

"Monsieur," interrupted D'Artagnan, "the King alone — do you understand? — has the right to give orders to my musketeers. As for you, I forbid you to do so, and I say so in his Majesty's presence; gentlemen who wear swords differ from paltry fellows wearing pens behind their ears."

"D'Artagnan! D'Artagnan!" murmured the King.

"It is humiliating," continued the musketeer; "my soldiers are dishonored. I do not command rioters, no, nor clerks of the intendant's office, either, *mordieux!*"

"But what is all this about?" asked the King, authoritatively.

"About this, Sire. M. Colbert, who was unable to guess what your Majesty's orders were, and, consequently, was unaware I was about to arrest M. Fouquet; M. Colbert, who had an iron cage made for his patron of yesterday, has sent M. de Roncherat to M. Fouquet's residence, and under the pretext that it was necessary to get at the superintendent's papers, all his furniture has been carried off. My musketeers surrounded the house in the morning; such were my orders. Why has any one dared to send them inside? Why were they forced to be present at the pillaging of it and to become, in some sort, accomplices in the act? *Mordieux!* we are the servants of the King, and not the servants of M. Colbert!"

"M. d'Artagnan," said the King, "take care; such observations should not be made in my presence, particularly when they are made in such a tone."

"I have acted in the King's interest," stammered Colbert; "it is hard to be treated in this manner by one of your Maj-

esty's officers, and that too, when the respect I owe my sovereign prevents me from retaliating,"

"The respect you owe your sovereign!" cried D'Artagnan, whose eyes flamed; "the respect you owe your sovereign consists in making his authority respected and his person beloved. Every agent of unlimited power is the representative of that power, and when the people curse the hand that smites them, it is the hand of royalty that has to bear the brunt of their reproaches. Must a soldier, hardened by forty years of wounds and bloodshed, teach you this lesson, monsieur? Must mercy be on my side and ferocity on yours? You have had innocent men arrested, bound, imprisoned!"

"M. Fouquet's accomplices, perhaps," said Colbert.

"Who has told you that M. Fouquet has accomplices, or even that he is guilty? The King alone knows it, and his justice is not blind. When he says: 'Arrest, imprison such and such people,' he is obeyed. Talk not to me, then, of the respect you have for the King, and be careful of your words, lest, perchance, they may conceal a threat, for the King will not permit those who serve him well to be threatened by those who serve him ill, and in case — which God forbid! — I had a master so ungrateful, I would still know how to make myself respected."

Having spoken in this fashion, D'Artagnan drew himself up proudly, with flashing eye, quivering lip, and hand on sword-hilt, affecting to be much more angry than he really was.

Colbert, humiliated and enraged, bent his head to the King, as if asking permission to withdraw.

The King, wavering between pride and curiosity, did not know what part to take. D'Artagnan saw his hesitation. To stay longer would be a mistake; he wanted to obtain a triumph over Colbert and the only way to do so was to drive the King into a corner from which there was no escape except by choosing one of the two antagonists.

D'Artagnan, then, like Colbert, bowed; but the King, who was anxious to hear, above all, an exact and detailed account of the arrest of his superintendent of finances, — that man who had for a moment made him tremble, — saw that the musketeer's ill-humor was likely to put off for at least a quarter of an hour the story he was burning to hear; he therefore dismissed Colbert, who had nothing new to tell him, from his mind, and addressed his captain.

"Well, monsieur," said he, "give an account of your mission; you can rest afterward."

D'Artagnan, whose foot was on the threshold, halted at these words, retraced his steps, and Colbert was constrained to retire. The intendant's face took on a purple tinge; his dark, malignant eyes shone with a sombre fire under the bushy eyebrows; he bowed to the King, half drew himself up as he passed D'Artagnan, and retired with death in his heart.

Now that D'Artagnan was alone with the King, he sobered down immediately, and, composing his countenance, said :

"Sire, you are a young King. It is by the dawn that men judge whether the day is to be fine or overcast. What auguries, Sire, are the people, placed by God under your law, likely to draw from the beginning of your reign, if the intermediaries between them and you are ministers of anger and violence? But, to come back to myself, Sire, and abandon a discussion you may think idle and perhaps unbecoming, I have arrested M. Fouquet."

"You took your time about it," said the King, sourly.

D'Artagnan looked at the King.

"I see that I have expressed myself badly," said he. "I have just informed your Majesty that I arrested M. Fouquet!"

"Yes; well?"

"I should have told your Majesty that M. Fouquet arrested me; it would have been far more accurate. I rectify my statement, therefore: I have been arrested by M. Fouquet."

It was Louis XIV.'s turn to be surprised, and surprised his Majesty was. D'Artagnan, with his extraordinary keenness of vision, appreciated what was passing in the mind of his master. He did not give him time to put questions. He related, with that poetry and picturesqueness which, perhaps, he alone possessed at that period, the escape of Fouquet, the pursuit, the furious race, and, lastly, the inimitable generosity of the superintendent, who could have got away half a score of times, and could have slain his pursuer twenty times over, but who had preferred a prison — and worse still, perhaps, — to the humiliation of the man bent on robbing him of his liberty.

The King grew more and more agitated as the musketeer went on, hanging on the speaker's every word and knocking his finger nails against one another.

"The plain conclusion, at least in my eyes, is, Sire, that a man capable of behaving in this fashion is an honest man and cannot be the enemy of his King. Such is my opinion, and I repeat it to your Majesty. I am aware, Sire, that your answer will be: 'Reasons of state,' and I bow before it. It is worthy of all respect. Well, I received my orders; they have been executed, much against my will, it is true; but they have been executed. I have no more to say."

"Where is M. Fouquet now?" asked Louis, after a moment's silence.

"M. Fouquet," replied D'Artagnan, "is in the iron cage prepared for him by M. Colbert, and is now going on the road to Angers as fast as four stout horses can carry him."

"Why did you leave him on the way?"

"Because your Majesty did not order me to go to Angers. The best proof of that is the fact that your Majesty was looking for me a while ago -- and I had another reason, besides."

"What is it?"

"If I had gone, poor M. Fouquet would never have attempted to escape."

"What do you mean?" cried the King, completely bewildered.

"Your Majesty must understand, surely you understand, Sire, -- that my warmest wish is to hear that M. Fouquet is at liberty. I have assigned him the most stupid corporal I could find among my musketeers, in order to give him a chance of escaping."

"Are you mad, M. d'Artagnan?" cried the King, folding his arms across his breast. "Is it possible that any one can give expression to such monstrous thoughts, even if he have the misfortune to conceive them?"

"Ah, Sire, you can hardly expect me to be M. Fouquet's enemy, after what he has done for me and for you? No, if you are determined to keep him under bolts and bars, never send me to guard him. However close the wires of the cage, the bird would manage to fly through them in the end."

"I am astonished," said the King, darkly, "that you did not immediately follow the fortunes of him whom M. Fouquet wished to seat on my throne. You could then have all you wanted; affection and gratitude. In my service, monsieur, you can only find a master."

"If M. Fouquet had not gone for you to the Bastille, Sire,

there was another man who would," replied D'Artagnan, with marked emphasis; "and you are well aware, Sire, that that man would have been myself."

The King paused. These words, words at once so frank and true, of his captain of musketeers, could not be gainsaid. As he listened, the King recalled the D'Artagnan of other days, the D'Artagnan who hid behind the curtains of his bed in the Palais-Royal when the Parisians, under the leadership of Cardinal de Retz, had come to make certain of the presence of the King; the D'Artagnan whom he had saluted from the door of his carriage on his way to Notre-Dame after his entrance into Paris; the soldier who had left his service at Blois; the lieutenant he had summoned to his side when the death of Mazarin restored him his power; the man he had ever found loyal, courageous, and devoted.

Louis advanced to the door, and called Colbert.

Colbert had not left the corridor, where the secretaries were working. Colbert appeared.

"Colbert, you have ordered M. Fouquet's house to be searched."

"Yes, Sire."

"With what result?"

"M. de Roncherat, sent thither with your Majesty's musketeers, has placed certain papers in my hands."

"I will look them over. Give me your hand."

"My hand, Sire?"

"Yes, to place it in that of M. d'Artagnan. In fact, M. d'Artagnan," he added, turning with a smile to the soldier, who, on seeing the clerk, had resumed his haughty attitude, "you have really no acquaintance with the man before you. Make his acquaintance."

And he pointed to Colbert.

"He may be but an indifferent servant in a subaltern position, but he will be a great man when I raise him to the first rank."

"Sire!" stammered Colbert, made giddy by fear as well as by pleasure.

"I understand now," murmured D'Artagnan in the King's ear, "he was jealous."

"Exactly, and jealousy tied his wings."

"He will be a winged serpent henceforth," growled the musketeer, not yet reconciled to his late adversary.

But when Colbert approached, his physiognomy presented an aspect so different from that which it usually wore, he looked so kind and gentle and affable, his eyes shone with such noble intelligence, that D'Artagnan was shaken, almost changed, in his convictions.

Colbert pressed his hand.

"What the King has just said to you, monsieur, is a proof of his Majesty's profound knowledge of men. My unrelenting opposition to abuses before to-day is a proof of my ambition to lay the foundation of a great reign for my King and great prosperity for my country. I have many ideas, M. d'Artagnan; you will see them bear fruit in the sun of public peace; and, though I may not have the assurance nor the happiness that I shall win the friendship of honest men, I am at least certain that I shall win their esteem. To win their admiration, monsieur, I would give my life."

Such a change, such sudden distinction of bearing, and the silent approbation of the King as well, gave the musketeer food for thought. He bowed very courteously to Colbert, who never took his eyes off him.

Seeing them reconciled, the King dismissed them. They passed out together.

As soon as they had crossed the threshold, the new minister stopped the captain, and said:

"Is it possible, monsieur, that eyes like yours have not found out the sort of man I am, at the first glance?"

"M. Colbert," rejoined the musketeer, "when the sun is in your eyes, you cannot see a fire, however strongly it blazes. As you well know, the man who is in power diffuses a dazzling brightness all around him; and, by the way, now that you are that man, why continue to persecute him who has fallen, and fallen from such a height?"

"I, monsieur? Oh, monsieur, I have not the slightest desire to persecute him. I simply wanted to have the management of the finances, because I am ambitious, and above all because I have the utmost confidence in my own ability; because I like to have the King's gold under my eye, and I know I shall have it there; because, though I lived for the next thirty years, not a single coin of it would stick to my palm; because with that gold I will erect granaries, public buildings, cities, and will dig harbors; because I will create a navy, equip fleets that shall bear the name of France to the most remote

regions ; because I will endow libraries and academies ; because, in a word, I will make France the first country in the world, and the richest. These are the reasons for my antipathy to M. Fouquet, who hindered me from doing what I knew I could do. And when I am great and strong, when France is great and strong, I shall be the first to cry : ‘ Mercy ! ’ ”

“ Did you say, ‘ Mercy ’ ? Then go and ask the King to liberate him. It is for your sake the King crushes him.”

Colbert again raised his head.

“ Monsieur,” said he, “ you are well aware that such is not the case, and that the King has personal motives for disliking M. Fouquet. It is not for me to teach you that.”

“ But the King will grow tired at last of persecuting him ; he will forget.”

“ The King never forgets, M. d’Artagnan. Hold ! The King is calling, he is about to give an order ; do you think I have influenced him ? Listen.”

The King was, indeed, calling his secretaries.

“ M. d’Artagnan ? ” said he.

“ Here I am, Sire.”

“ Send twenty of your musketeers to M. de Saint-Aignan’s ; they will guard M. Fouquet.”

D’Artagnan and Colbert exchanged glances.

“ And,” continued the King, “ they will conduct the prisoner from Angers to the Bastille in Paris.”

“ You were right,” said the captain to the minister.

“ Saint-Aignan,” the King went on, “ should any one attempt to speak privately to M. Fouquet on the road, you will have him shot.”

“ But what about myself, Sire ? ”

“ You will speak with him only in presence of the musketeers.”

The duke inclined, and passed out to see to the execution of the order.

D’Artagnan was also going to retire. The King stopped him.

“ Monsieur,” said he, “ you will at once go and take possession of the island and fief of Belle-Isle-en-Mer.”

“ Yes, Sire ; unaided ? ”

“ Take all the troops you need, to avoid a check in case the fortress hold out.”

A murmur of flattering incredulity spread among the courtiers.

"Such things have been seen," said D'Artagnan.

"Yes, in my childhood," remarked the King, "and I do not wish to see them again. You understand, monsieur? Do not return except with the keys of the place."

Colbert approached D'Artagnan.

"If you accomplish your mission successfully," said he, "it will be the first step to a marshal's baton."

"Why do you say: 'If you accomplish your mission successfully'?"

"Because you will find it difficult."

"In what respect?"

"You have friends in Belle-Isle, M. d'Artagnan, and it is not an easy thing for men like you to stride to greatness over the dead body of a friend."

D'Artagnan bent his head, while Colbert returned to the King's side.

A quarter of an hour later, D'Artagnan received a written order to blow up the fortifications of Belle-Isle, in case of resistance, with the power of life and death over all the inhabitants and *refugees*, and an injunction not to allow a single one to escape.

"Colbert was right," thought D'Artagnan, "my marshal's baton would cost the life of my two friends. But people forget that my friends are not more stupid than the birds, and will not wait until the fowler's hand is laid upon them before spreading their wings. I will show them that hand so plainly that they will have plenty of time to see it. Poor Porthos! poor Aramis! No, my advancement shall not cost your wings a single feather!"

After coming to this conclusion, D'Artagnan assembled the royal army, embarked with it at Paimbœuf, and set sail without losing a moment.

CHAPTER LXIX.

BELLE-ISLE-EN-MER.

AT the end of the mole, which the raging sea dashes against at evening tide, two men, arm in arm, were conversing in an animated and unreserved tone. No other human being could hear their words, borne away as they were, one by one, by the gusts of wind, with the white foam swept from the crests of the waves. The sun had just set in the vast sheet of the reddened ocean, like some gigantic crucible.

Occasionally, one of the two men turned round toward the east, and cast an anxious, inquiring glance over the sea. The second man questioned the face of his companion instead, and was apparently seeking information from the expression of his features. Then after a silence, during which both were busy with dismal thoughts, they resumed their walk.

Every one has already recognized these two men; they are our two outlaws, Aramis and Porthos, who had taken refuge in Belle-Isle, after the ruin of their hopes, after the failure of M. d'Herblay's mighty scheme.

"You may say what you like, my dear Aramis," repeated Porthos, as he vigorously inhaled the salt air with which he was in the habit of inflating his powerful chest; "you may say what you like, Aramis, the disappearance of all the fishing boats that left us during the last two days is not natural. There has been no storm at sea. The weather has been constantly calm, not the slightest disturbance. Moreover, if there had been a storm, all our boats could not have been sunk. It is all very strange; the disappearance of these boats fills me with amazement, I can tell you."

"True," murmured Aramis, "you are right, my dear Porthos. There is really something strange in all this."

"And, besides," added Porthos, whose ideas seemed widened by the assent of the bishop of Vannes, "you must have remarked that if these craft had perished some wreckage must have floated to shore."

"I have remarked that as well as you."

"But have you remarked also that the only two boats that were left in the island, and which I sent in search of the others —"

Aramis interrupted his companion by a cry and by such an abrupt movement that Porthos came to a standstill as if astounded.

"What is it you tell me, Porthos? You have actually sent away the two boats —"

"To search for the others. Of course," answered Porthos, simply.

"Unhappy man! What have you done? Then we are lost!" exclaimed the bishop.

"Lost! What do you mean?" asked Porthos, quite scared.

"Lost how, Aramis? Why is it we are lost?"

Aramis bit his lip.

"Oh, it is nothing. Excuse me, but I was about to say —"

"What?"

"That if we took a notion to make a little trip by sea we could not."

"Upon my word! So that is what troubles you! A fine notion of pleasure you have, *ma foi!* So far as I am concerned, I do not regret it. What I should regret is, certainly not the amusements we are likely to find in Belle-Isle; what I regret, Aramis, is Bracieux and Le Vallon, and Pierrefonds and my beautiful France. Here we are not in France, my dear friend; we are — I do not know where we are. Oh! I must tell you, in all sincerity, my dear friend, and your affection will excuse my freedom, that I am not happy in Belle-Isle; no, in good truth, I am not happy here!"

Aramis heaved a faint sigh.

"My dear friend," he answered, "that is the very thing that renders your sending the two boats away in search of the ones that disappeared two days ago so unpleasant. If you had not sent them on this voyage of discovery, we could have set out ourselves."

"Set out! But our orders, Aramis?"

"What orders?"

"*Parbleu!* the orders you were always repeating to me on every occasion. You know them well: the orders to defend Belle-Isle against the usurper."

"True," murmured Aramis.

"You see, then, my dear friend, we cannot set out, and that my sending the boats in search of the other ones could not do us any harm."

Aramis was silent, and his eyes, luminous as a sea-gull's,

wandered long over the sea, eagerly and inquiringly, trying to pierce through the horizon.

"But for all that," continued Porthos, who clung to his idea the more firmly since it had received the bishop's approval, "for all that, you have not given me any explanation as to what is likely to have happened to these unfortunate boats. Cries and lamentations assail me wherever I pass. The children weep when they see the despair of their mothers, as if it were my duty to restore them their absent fathers and husbands. What do you think, my dear friend, and what answer ought I to give them?"

"Let us think of everything, my dear fellow, and answer nothing."

The reply did not satisfy Porthos. He turned away, grumbling disconsolately.

Aramis stopped the valiant soldier.

"Do you imagine, my dear friend," said he, in a melancholy tone, taking the giant's hands affectionately in his own, "do you imagine that, in the glorious days of our youth, when we were all strong and brave, the whole four of us, — do you imagine, Porthos, that if we had determined on returning to France, this sheet of salt water would have hindered us?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Porthos, "six leagues?"

"If you had seen me climbing on top of a plank, would you have stayed on land, Porthos?"

"No, by God, no, Aramis! But what sort of a plank could sustain us to-day, my dear friend, me especially!" And the Seigneur de Bracieux cast a smiling glance over his colossal rotundity. "But, seriously, are you not rather tired of Belle-Isle? Would you not prefer the comforts of your residence, your episcopal palace at Vannes? Come, now, confess."

"No," answered Aramis, but without venturing to look at Porthos.

"Well, then, let us remain," rejoined his friend, with a sigh which, in spite of his efforts to repress it, escaped loudly from his breast. "Yes, let us remain. Still," he added, "if one had made up his mind, was firmly determined to return to France, and had no boats —"

"Have you noticed another thing, my friend? Have you noticed that, ever since our boats have disappeared, ever since

our fishermen have not returned, not even a skiff has come to the island?"

"Yes, you are right, undoubtedly. I have remarked that too, and it was very natural for me to do so, because, before these two unlucky days, boats and sloops used to arrive in dozens."

"We must find out the reason," exclaimed Aramis, suddenly and eagerly, "even if I have to build a raft —"

"But we have canoes, my dear friend. What if I were to get into one —"

"Get into a canoe! What are you thinking of, Porthos? Get into a canoe to capsize it? No, riding on the waves is not exactly our trade. We must wait, we must wait!"

And Aramis strode along, giving signs of the most convulsive emotion.

Porthos, who was getting tired of keeping in the track of his friend's feverish movements; Porthos, who because of his serenity and good faith was incapable of comprehending a sort of agitation that was manifested by frequent jerks and starts; Porthos stopped him.

"Let us sit down on this rock," said he; "there, beside me. And now, Aramis, I conjure you for the last time, explain so that I can understand, explain to me what we are doing here."

"Porthos —" said Aramis, taken aback.

"I know that the false king has been trying to dethrone the true king. That is plain, I can understand that easily enough."

"Yes," assented Aramis.

"I know the false king schemed to sell Belle-Isle to the English. That, too, is plain."

"Yes."

"I know that we, being captains and engineers, have thrown ourselves into Belle-Isle, taken the direction of the works and the command of the ten companies levied, paid, and controlled by M. Fouquet, or rather by his son-in-law. That also I understand."

Aramis rose impatiently. He looked like a lion troubled by a gnat.

Porthos held him back by the arm.

"But what I do not understand, what, in spite of all my efforts and all my reflections, I cannot understand, and what I

shall never be able to understand, is that, instead of sending us troops and reinforcements of men, munitions, and provisions, we are left without boats, left without help, left without any one coming near us ; that, so far from having any correspondence with outsiders, either by signals, or written or verbal communications, we are cut off from relations with every one. Come, now, Aramis, answer me, or rather, before answering, will you allow me to tell you what I have been thinking about ? Would you like to know the idea, the fancy, that has come into my head ? ”

The bishop looked up.

“ Well, Aramis,” continued Porthos, “ I have been thinking. The idea, the fancy that has come into my head, is that something has happened in France. I dreamed all last night, dreamed of dead fish, broken eggs, rooms badly furnished, poorly kept. Evil dreams, my dear D’Herblay ! dreams that are forerunners of ill luck ! ”

“ Porthos, what is that over yonder ? ” interrupted Aramis, suddenly rising and pointing to a black spot on the purple line of the ocean.

“ A boat ! ” cried Porthos, “ yes, a boat, beyond any doubt. — Ah ! we ’re going to have news at last ! ”

“ Two ! ” exclaimed the bishop, discovering another spar, “ two ! three ! four ! ”

“ Five ! ” said Porthos, in his turn. “ Great heavens ! it is a fleet ! Thank God ! thank God ! ”

“ Our boats returning, probably,” rejoined Aramis, very uneasy, notwithstanding the confidence he affected.

“ They are very large for fishermen’s boats,” observed Porthos ; “ and then, do you not notice, my dear friend, that they are coming from the Loire ? ”

“ Yes, they are coming from the Loire.”

“ And — hold on ! — every one has seen them as well as myself. Look, the women and children are hurrying to the jetties.”

An old fisherman passed them.

“ Are these our boats ? ” inquired Aramis.

The old man gazed intently at the horizon.

“ No, monseigneur,” he answered ; “ they are transports belonging to the royal service.”

“ Belonging to the royal service ! ” repeated Aramis, with a start. “ How do you know ? ”

"By the flag."

"But," said Porthos, "the boats are hardly visible; then how the devil, my good fellow, can you distinguish the flag?"

"I see a flag," replied the old man. "Neither our own boats nor the trading sloops carry one. The pinnaces yonder, monsieur, are generally employed in transporting troops."

"Ah!" muttered Aramis.

"Hurrah!" shouted Porthos; "they are bringing us reinforcements. Do you not think so, Aramis?"

"Probably."

"Unless they are bringing the English."

"By the Loire? That would, indeed, be unfortunate, Porthos; it would show they had passed through Paris."

"You are right. They must be conveying us reinforcements or provisions."

Aramis leaned his head on his hand, and did not answer. Then, suddenly:

"Porthos," said he, "have the alarm sounded."

"The alarm! What are you thinking of?"

"Yes, and let the cannoniers mount to their batteries, the gunners to their guns; pay particular attention to the coast batteries."

Porthos stared at him, stared as if he were anxious to find out whether his friend had lost his senses.

"I will go and have these orders executed myself," continued Aramis, in his gentlest tones, "if you do not care to do so, my dear friend."

"But I will go this very instant," cried Porthos, starting to have these orders executed, occasionally looking back, however, to see if the Bishop of Vannes had not made a mistake, and if, on returning to more rational ideas, he would not recall him.

The alarm was sounded; there was a blare of trumpets, a roll of drums, and the great bell in the watch tower clanged furiously.

The dikes and moles were at once filled with soldiers and curious spectators; lighted matches burned in the hands of the gunners, stationed behind the bulky cannon lying on the carriages. When every one was at his post and all the needed preparations had been made, Porthos whispered timidly in the bishop's ear:

"Will you allow me to ask the meaning of this, Aramis?"

"My dear fellow," muttered M. d'Herblay, in response to his lieutenant's question, "you will understand only too soon."

"The fleet yonder, the fleet heading for the cape in the harbor of Belle-Isle, is a royal fleet, is it not? Am I not right?"

"Yes; but, as there are two kings in France, the question is to which of them does it belong, eh?"

"Ah! you have opened my eyes," returned the giant, entirely convinced by this unanswerable suggestion.

And Porthos, whose friend's reply had opened his eyes, or rather, thickened the bandage that covered them, went as fast as he could to the batteries, determined to keep a keen watch over his men and encourage every one to do his duty.

Aramis, however, with eyes still riveted on the horizon, saw that the ships were coming nearer and nearer. By climbing to the tops of the crags and cliffs, the soldiers and the islanders were enabled to distinguish the masts, then the lower sails, and, lastly, the hulls of the transports, all bearing the royal flag of France at the masthead.

At nightfall, one of these pinnacles that had created such a sensation among the inhabitants of Belle-Isle, anchored within cannon-shot of the fortifications. In spite of the darkness it was observed that there was some excitement on board this vessel, from which a boat was let down; it was manned by three rowers, who bent to their oars, rowed in the direction of the harbor, and touched land just under the fort.

The commander of this yawl jumped on the mole. He held a letter in his hand, waved it in the air, and apparently wanted to communicate with some one. He was quickly recognized by several of the soldiers as one of the pilots belonging to the island. Indeed, he was the skipper of one of the two boats which Aramis had wished to keep in the harbor and which Porthos, on account of his anxiety as to the fate of the fishermen who had disappeared two days before, had sent in search of the missing craft. He asked to be conducted to M. d'Herblay. At a sign from a sergeant, two soldiers stood each on one side of him, and escorted him.

Aramis was on the quay. The envoy presented himself before the bishop. It was almost entirely dark, in spite of the torches borne by the soldiers who followed Aramis at a certain distance when he was making his rounds.

"Eh ! is that you, Jonathas ? " said he. "Where have you come from ? "

"I have come from those who took me prisoner, monseigneur."

"Who took you ? "

"You know, monseigneur, we started to search for our comrades ? "

"Yes. What happened ? "

"Well, monseigneur, we had hardly gone a league when we were captured by a *chasse-marée* belonging to the King."

"To which King ? " asked Porthos.

Jonathas stared in amazement.

"Go on," continued the bishop.

"Well, monseigneur, we were, as I have said, captured, and put alongside those who were taken yesterday morning."

"But what can have caused this mania of theirs for taking you ? " interrupted Porthos.

"To hinder us from telling you we were taken, monsieur," was the answer of Jonathas.

Porthos could make nothing of it.

"And you were released to-day ? " he inquired.

"Because they wanted us to tell you they had taken us, monsieur."

"More confusing than ever," thought honest Porthos.

Meanwhile, Aramis had been reflecting.

"So a royal fleet is blockading the coast, then ? " said he.

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Who commands it ? "

"The captain of the King's musketeers."

"D'Artagnan ? "

"D'Artagnan ! " cried Porthos.

"I think that is his name."

"And it was he who gave you the letter ? "

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Have the torches brought nearer," said Aramis.

"It is his hand," said Porthos.

Aramis read the following lines rapidly:

"Order of the King to take Belle-Isle ;

"Order to put the garrison to the sword, if it resist ;

"Order to make all the men in the garrison prisoners ;

"Signed, D'ARTAGNAN, who arrested, on the day before yesterday, M. Fouquet, to send him to the Bastille."

Aramis turned pale and crumpled the paper in his hand.

"What is it all about?" inquired Porthos.

"It is not a matter of any consequence, my friend — Jonathas!"

"Monseigneur?"

"Did you speak with M. d'Artagnan?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"What did he say?"

"That for the sake of fuller information, he would have a conversation with you, monseigneur."

"Where?"

"On board his vessel."

"On board his vessel?" repeated Porthos.

"He asked me to take both of you in my boat and bring you to him."

"Let us start," said Porthos. "What a dear fellow D'Artagnan is!"

Aramis stopped him.

"Are you mad?" said he. "How do we know that this is not a snare for us?"

"A snare of the other king?" quoth Porthos, mysteriously.

"A snare, in any case. That is enough for us, my friend."

"Possibly. Still, when D'Artagnan sends for us —"

"How do you know it is D'Artagnan?"

"Ah! But his handwriting —"

"May have been imitated. This is evidently an imitation."

"You are always right; although we know nothing in the meantime."

Aramis kept silent.

"It is true, however," said worthy Porthos, "that we do not need to know anything."

"But what am I to do?" inquired Jonathas.

"You will return to the captain."

"Yes, monseigneur."

"And say that we request him to come himself to the island."

"I understand," remarked Porthos.

"Yes, monseigneur," answered Jonathas. "But suppose the captain refuses to come to Belle-Isle —?"

"Should he refuse, we have cannon, and know how to use them."

"Against D'Artagnan?" exclaimed Porthos.

"If it is D'Artagnan, Porthos, he will come. You may go now, Jonathas."

"*Ma foi!* I no longer comprehend anything," murmured Porthos.

"I am about to make you comprehend everything, my dear friend, for the time for doing so has come. Sit down on this gun-carriage, open your ears, and listen attentively."

"I am all attention. *Pardieu!* don't have any doubts about that!"

"Can I go now, monseigneur?" asked Jonathas.

"Yes, and return with an answer. Let the boat pass — you men there!"

The boat started on its way back to the ship.

Aramis took the hand of Porthos and began to enter on his explanation.

CHAPTER LXX.

THE EXPLANATION OF ARAMIS.

"WHAT I have to say, Porthos, my friend, will probably surprise you, but it will also open your eyes."

"I like to be surprised," answered Porthos, benignantly; "do not spare me, then, I entreat you. I am not easily moved; be not afraid, but speak on."

"It is hard, hard for me, Porthos, to do so, for I have, in good truth, — I warn you for the second time, — very strange, very extraordinary things to tell you."

"Oh, you are such a fine talker, my dear friend, that I could listen to you for entire days. Speak, then, my dear friend. But stay, I have got hold of an idea: to lighten your task and make it easier for you to tell me these strange things, I am going to question you."

"Nothing could please me better."

"Why are we on the point of fighting, Aramis?"

"If you put such questions as that, if that is your way of lightening my task, if you think by such questions to aid me in making my confession, you are quite mistaken, Porthos. Stay, my friend; with a man so good, generous, and devoted as you are, it is due both to him and to myself to begin the confession bravely. I have deceived you, my excellent friend."

"Deceived me?"

"Ah! unfortunately, yes!"

"Did you do so for my good, Aramis?"

"I thought so, Porthos; I thought so sincerely, my friend."

"In that case," rejoined the honest Seigneur de Bracieux, "you have rendered me a service, for which I thank you. If you had not deceived me I should, very likely, have deceived myself. But tell me in what respect you have deceived me?"

"I served the usurper, against whom Louis XIV. is at this moment directing all his efforts."

"The usurper," said Porthos, scratching his forehead, "is — I don't well understand."

"Is one of the two kings who are contending for the crown of France?"

"Very well! So you served the one who is not Louis XIV.?"

"You have hit the truth at the first guess."

"And the consequence is that —"

"We are rebels, my poor friend."

"*Diable! diable!*" cried Porthos, in a tone of disappointment.

"Oh, do not be alarmed, Porthos, we'll find a means of escaping, depend on it."

"That is not what troubles me; what disturbs me is that word "*rebels*;" it is an ugly word."

"Ah! it can't be helped!"

"So, then, the duchy that was promised me —"

"Was to be given by the usurper."

"It is not the same thing," retorted Porthos, majestically.

"My friend, if it had depended on me, you should have become a prince."

Porthos began biting his nails dejectedly.

"It was wrong of you to deceive me in that," he continued. "I counted on the promised duchy,—counted seriously on it,—knowing that you were a man of your word, my dear Aramis."

"My poor Porthos! Forgive me, I beseech you!"

"So," Porthos went on, without paying any attention to the entreaty of the Bishop of Vannes, "so then, I have a grave quarrel with King Louis XIV.?"

"I will arrange all that, my good friend, I will arrange it. I will take all the blame on my own shoulders."

“Aramis! —”

“No, no, Porthos, I must conjure you to leave the matter in my hands. No false generosity! no unseasonable self-sacrifice! You know nothing of my schemes, and you have had no schemes yourself. With me it is different. I am the sole author of the plot. But I had need of my inseparable companion. I summoned you to my aid, and you came, remembering our old device: ‘All for one, one for all.’ My crime, dear Porthos, is that I have been selfish.”

“I like that word,” answered Porthos; “and, since you have been acting solely for yourself, I cannot be angry with you. It was so natural in you to do so!”

And, after these sublime words, Porthos cordially squeezed his friend’s hand.

Aramis, in presence of such greatness of soul, discovered how small he himself was. It was the second time he saw himself forced to bow before that superiority of heart which is far grander than splendor of intellect.

He responded to the generous caress of his friend by a silent and energetic pressure.

“Now,” said Porthos, “that we have come to a perfect explanation; now that I have a perfect comprehension of our position in connection with King Louis, I think the time has arrived for you to make me comprehend also the political intrigue of which we are the victims; for I see clearly that there must be some political intrigue or other under all this.”

“My dear Porthos, D’Artagnan will soon be here and will give you the fullest details about the affair. But excuse me. I am heart-broken with sorrow and racked with pain, at a time when I need all my presence of mind, all my powers of reflection, to find a means of escape from the predicament in which we have so imprudently involved ourselves. Louis XIV. has now but a single enemy. I am that enemy, and I alone. I made you my prisoner, you followed me, I liberate you to-day, and you fly back to your prince. You see, Porthos, there is nothing in the world to hinder you from doing so.”

“You think so?” inquired Porthos.

“I am quite sure of it.”

“Then why,” said Porthos, with his admirable good sense, “why, if our position be so favorable, why, my excellent friend, have we been providing ourselves with cannon, muskets, and engines of every sort? The simplest thing, it seems to me,

would be to say to Captain d'Artagnan : ' Dear friend, we have made a mistake ; we wish to rectify it. Please open the door and let us pass. Good day ! ' ”

“ Ah ! if it only could be ! ” answered Aramis, with a shake of the head.

“ Why should n't it be, my dear friend ? Do you not approve of my plan ? ”

“ I see an obstacle.”

“ What is it ? ”

“ Suppose D'Artagnan came with such orders that we should be obliged to defend ourselves ? ”

“ Nonsense ! defend ourselves against D'Artagnan ? Against our good D'Artagnan ? What folly ! ”

Aramis shook his head again.

“ Porthos,” said he, “ when I had the matches lit, the canons pointed, the signal of alarm sounded ; when I had every one summoned to his post on the ramparts, those stout ramparts which you have so admirably fortified, I had a purpose. Wait before you judge, or rather, do not wait — ”

“ Wait to do what ? ”

“ If I knew, my friend, I would tell you.”

“ But there is a simpler course open than that of defending ourselves. We can take a boat and then to France, where — ”

“ Dear Porthos,” answered Aramis, with a melancholy smile, “ let us not reason like children ; let us be men both in deliberation and execution — stay, some one is hailing us from the harbor ; a boat must have arrived. Attention, Porthos ! be on your guard ! ”

“ It's D'Artagnan, I'm sure,” replied Porthos in a voice of thunder, making for the parapet.

“ Yes, it is I,” answered the captain of the musketeers, springing lightly to one of the steps of the mole, mounting rapidly up to the esplanade where his two friends were waiting for him.

But as he was ascending, Porthos and Aramis descried an officer following D'Artagnan and treading in every one of his footsteps.

The captain stopped half-way in his course. His companion imitated him.

“ Order your people to retire,” cried the captain to Aramis and Porthos ; “ order them to retire beyond reach of our voices.”

The order, which was given by Porthos, was executed immediately.

Thereupon D'Artagnan turned to the man following him.

"Monsieur," said the musketeer, "we are no longer on the King's fleet, where you addressed me so arrogantly lately."

"Monsieur," answered the officer, "I did not address you arrogantly; I obeyed, simply and rigorously, my orders. I have been ordered to follow you, and I do so. I have been ordered not to allow any communication between you and any one else without becoming cognizant of such communication, and so I am compelled to be present at it."

D'Artagnan trembled with rage. Porthos and Aramis, who heard the dialogue, trembled also, but it was with anxiety and fear. D'Artagnan, all the time chewing his mustache with that fierce energy which was the external sign of a fury that was sure to end in a terrible outburst, approached the officer.

"Monsieur," said he, in a voice scarcely above a whisper, but which gathered intensity from the fact that, while it affected a profound calmness, it was big with storms, "monsieur, when I sent a skiff here, you insisted on knowing what I had written to the defenders of Belle-Isle. You showed me an order, and that very moment I showed you what I had written. When the skipper of the boat sent by me returned and I heard from him the reply of yonder two gentlemen, you too heard the report of my messenger. In all this you acted in compliance with your orders, and all was executed with due propriety and punctuality; is not that the case?"

"Yes, monsieur," stammered the officer; "yes, no doubt, monsieur — but —"

"But — M. Colbert, who gave you these instructions, is no longer in question, nor is any one else in the world whose commands you obey: the person in question is a man who crosses the path of M. d'Artagnan, who happens to be alone with M. d'Artagnan on the steps of a stairs bathed by thirty feet of salt water. A dangerous position for that man, monsieur! I warn you it is a dangerous position!"

"But, monsieur," answered the officer, diffidently, almost timorously, "if I am in your way, it is because I am on duty, and —"

"Monsieur, you have had the misfortune, either you or those who sent you, to insult me. I cannot exact satisfaction from

those who are behind you; they are either unknown to me or they are too far away. But you are within my reach, and I swear by God that if you take another step when I raise my foot to mount to where these gentlemen are standing — I swear by my name that I will cleave your head with one stroke of my sword, and hurl you into the water. Oh! I care very little about what comes of it. I have never been angry but six times in my life, monsieur, and every one of the five times before this I killed my man."

The officer did not move; he turned pale at the terrible threat, and answered with frank simplicity:

"Monsieur, you are doing wrong in preventing me from obeying my orders."

Porthos and Aramis, almost dumb with terror on the parapet, at length shouted:

"Dear D'Artagnan, take care!"

D'Artagnan silenced them with a gesture, raised his foot with appalling composure, and placed it on another step, then looked round to see if he were followed by the officer.

The officer made the sign of the cross and followed.

Porthos and Aramis, who knew their D'Artagnan, uttered a cry, and hurried forward to arrest the blow, the echo of which they fancied they already heard.

But D'Artagnan passed his sword into his left hand.

"Monsieur," said he, in a voice that betrayed strong emotion, "you are a brave man. You will, therefore, understand better what I am about to say to you than what I said just now."

"Speak, M. d'Artagnan, speak," answered the courageous officer.

"The gentlemen we have come to see, and against whom your orders are pointed, are my friends."

"I am aware of that, monsieur."

"You can understand, then, whether I should act toward them in the manner prescribed by your instructions."

"Yes, monsieur."

"Will you permit me to talk with them without witnesses?"

"M. d'Artagnan, if I yield to your request, if I do what you ask me to do, I am breaking my word; but to refuse to do so would be to displease you. I prefer the first alternative. Talk with your friends, and do not despise me, monsieur, for

doing, out of my affection for you whom I esteem and honor, — do not despise me for doing for your sake alone, and for no other motive, a discreditable act.”

D'Artagnan was deeply moved; he passed his arm quickly round the young man's neck, and then went up to his friends.

The officer wrapped his cloak about him, and sat down on the steps, which were covered with damp seaweed.

“And now,” said D'Artagnan to his friends, “this is the situation; judge for yourselves.”

They all three embraced, were clasped in one another's arms, as if they were still in the glorious days of their youth.

“What is the meaning of all this rigor?” asked Porthos.

“You must have some suspicion of the cause, my dear friend,” replied D'Artagnan.

“Very little, I assure you, my dear captain; for, undoubtedly, I have done nothing, — nor has Aramis, either,” the worthy man hastened to add.

D'Artagnan cast a reproachful look at the prelate; it pierced even that hardened heart.

“Dear Porthos!” cried the Bishop of Vannes.

“You see what has been done,” said D'Artagnan: “every one going to or coming from Belle-Isle is intercepted. Your boats have all been seized. If you had tried to escape, you must have fallen in with some of the cruisers that plow the sea in every direction and are all on the lookout for you. The King is determined to have you and will take you.”

And D'Artagnan, in his desperation, plucked out some of the hairs from his gray mustache.

Aramis grew gloomy, and Porthos indignant.

“This was my idea,” continued D'Artagnan: “To have you both come on board my vessel, to have you near me, and then to set you at liberty. But now how do I know but that, after my return to my ship, I may not meet a superior there, may not find secret orders depriving me of my command and giving it to some one else, who will dispose of me and of you, and no possible security for any of us?”

“I must stay in Belle-Isle,” said Aramis, resolutely, “and you may take my word that I shall not surrender if I can help it.”

Porthos did not speak. D'Artagnan noticed his friend's silence.

"I have to make another trial of the brave officer who has accompanied me and whose courageous obstinacy has delighted me. It proved that he is a true gentleman, and such a man, though our enemy, is worth a thousand fawning cowards. We must try to learn from him the full limit of his duties, and what his orders enable him to allow or forbid."

"Do so," said Aramis.

D'Artagnan went to the parapet, leaned over the steps of the mole, and called the officer, who mounted at once.

"Monsieur," said D'Artagnan, after interchanging with him the most cordial courtesies, such courtesies as are natural between gentlemen who know and appreciate each other, "monsieur," said he, "should I take these gentlemen with me, what would you do?"

"I would not offer any opposition, monsieur; but, as I have direct and formal orders to guard them, I will do so."

"Ah!" muttered D'Artagnan.

"It is all over!" said Aramis, in a hollow voice.

Porthos did not stir.

"Take Porthos with you," said the bishop. "He will be able to prove to the King, with my assistance and yours, M. d'Artagnan, that his connection with this affair hardly deserves notice."

"Hum!" murmured D'Artagnan. "Will you follow me, Porthos? The King is merciful."

"I require time for reflection," answered Porthos, nobly.

"Then you will remain here?"

"Until further orders," cried Aramis, excitedly.

"Until we get hold of an idea," rejoined D'Artagnan, "and that will not take long, for I have one already."

"Then let us say good-bye," exclaimed Aramis; "but, really, my dear Porthos, you ought to go with him."

"No!" answered the engineer, gruffly and shortly.

"As you please," returned Aramis, somewhat hurt in his nervous susceptibility by the morose tone of his comrade. "Still, I feel more confident, now that D'Artagnan has promised us an idea. I think I can give a pretty good guess what that idea is."

"Well, let us hear what it is," said the musketeer, holding his ear close to the bishop's mouth.

Aramis whispered a few hurried words, to which D'Artagnan answered :

" You have it ! "

" Certain to succeed ! " cried D'Herblay, triumphantly.

" Be sure to look out for yourselves during the sensation which the carrying out of it will create."

" Oh ! have no fear ! "

" And now, monsieur," said D'Artagnan to the officer, " a thousand thanks ! You have made three friends for life or death."

" Yes," answered Aramis.

Porthos said nothing, but nodded his assent.

D'Artagnan, after embracing his two old friends, left Belle-Isle, attended by the inseparable companion that M. Colbert had assigned him.

Thus, apart from the singular explanation with which honest Porthos had been so well satisfied, there was no apparent change in the lot of any one.

" Still," said Aramis, " there is D'Artagnan's idea ! "

D'Artagnan did not return on board without hammering at the idea he had lately discovered. Now, we know that when D'Artagnan did any hammering he was likely to make a breach that would admit the daylight. As for the officer, he was perfectly silent, and respectfully left the musketeer to his meditations. So when our captain's foot was once again on the deck of his ship, anchored, as we have said, within cannon-shot of the fort, he had already combined all his methods, offensive and defensive.

He at once assembled his council. This council was composed of the officers serving under his orders. All told, they were eight : a chief of the maritime forces ; a major who had charge of the artillery ; an engineer ; the officer whose acquaintance we have just made ; and four lieutenants. Having assembled them in his cabin on the poop, D'Artagnan rose, doffed his hat, and began in the following terms :

" Gentlemen, I have reconnoitred Belle-Isle-en-Mer, and have found a strong and resolute garrison there. Furthermore, I have discovered that the preparations made for defending it can give us a good deal of trouble. I have, therefore, decided to send for the two principal officers of the garrison so that we may talk with them. As soon as we have them away from their troops or their cannon, we can easily get the upper hand

of them, especially if we give them good reasons for surrendering. Are you of my opinion, gentlemen?"

The major of artillery rose.

"Monsieur," said he, respectfully but firmly, "you have just stated that the preparations made for defending Belle-Isle will give us a good deal of trouble. Am I to understand, then, that you are aware the island is determined to rebel?"

D'Artagnan was visibly annoyed by this question; but he was not the kind of man to be cast down by such a little obstacle. He continued:

"Monsieur," said he, "your remark is perfectly proper. But you are not ignorant that Belle-Isle is a fief of M. Fouquet, or that our ancient kings granted to the seigneurs of Belle-Isle the privilege of taking up arms."

The major was about to rise.

"Oh, do not interrupt me," D'Artagnan went on. "You were about to tell me that the right to take up arms against the English did not give them the right of taking up arms against their sovereign. But it is not M. Fouquet, I presume, who is holding Belle-Isle at the present moment, for I arrested M. Fouquet the day before yesterday. Now the inhabitants and defenders of Belle-Isle know nothing of this arrest, and it would be useless for you to try to convince them of it. It is such an extraordinary, unexpected, and incredible event that they would not believe you. A Breton serves his master and not his masters. He serves his master until he sees him lying dead before him. The Bretons, so far as I know, have not seen the dead body of M. Fouquet. It is not surprising, therefore, that they should hold out against any one who is not M. Fouquet or cannot show his signature."

The major bowed in sign of assent.

"You perceive, now," said D'Artagnan, "why I propose to summon the two chief officers of the garrison on board my vessel. They will see us, will see the forces of which we can dispose; they will, consequently, discover the fate that awaits them in case of rebellion. We shall pledge our honor that M. Fouquet is a prisoner, and that any resistance on their part can only do him harm. We shall tell them that when the first gun is fired, no mercy can be expected from the King. Then, at least I hope so, all resistance will cease. They will surrender without striking a blow, and we shall gain peaceable possession of a fortress which it might cost us a good deal to conquer."

The officer who had followed D'Artagnan to Belle-Isle was getting up to speak, but D'Artagnan stopped him.

"Yes, I know what you are going to say, monsieur; I know that an order of the King interdicts all secret communication with the defenders of Belle-Isle, and that is the very reason why I wish to communicate with them only in presence of my entire staff."

And D'Artagnan nodded to his officers in a manner that was intended to enhance his condescension.

The officers interchanged glances. They wanted to find out, from the expression of one another's eyes, what each was thinking; evidently they were inclined to adopt the opinion of D'Artagnan, who was delighted to perceive that they would consent to his sending a boat for Aramis and Porthos. But just at this very moment the King's officer drew a letter from his breast, and handed it to D'Artagnan. It bore on the cover the number 1.

"What, another?" muttered the captain, in surprise.

"Read, monsieur," said the officer, with a courtesy which was blended with sadness.

D'Artagnan, full of mistrust, unfolded the paper and read these lines:

"M. d'Artagnan is forbidden to assemble any council whatever, or to hold any deliberations, before Belle-Isle is surrendered, and the prisoners condemned to be shot.

"Signed,

LOUIS."

D'Artagnan repressed the shiver of impatience that ran through his whole body.

"Very well, monsieur," he said, with a courteous smile; "the King's orders shall be obeyed."

CHAPTER LXXI.

THE SEQUEL OF THE KING'S IDEAS AND OF D'ARTAGNAN'S IDEAS.

THE blow was direct, crushing, mortal. Although furious at being balked by the idea of the King, D'Artagnan did not, however, despair, and concentrating his mind on the idea he had brought with him from Belle-Isle, he developed out of it another method of saving his friends.

"Gentlemen," said he, abruptly, "since the King has devolved upon another person than me the execution of his secret orders, I no longer enjoy his confidence, and I should be, in good truth, unworthy of a command I was rash enough to hold in the face of such insulting suspicions. I shall, therefore, depart at once and hand in my resignation to the King. I give that resignation now in your presence, at the same time enjoining you to fall back on the coast of France so that the forces which his Majesty confided to me may not be put in any peril. You will, therefore, return to your posts, and order your men to do the same. In about an hour it will be ebb-tide. To your posts, gentlemen. I do not suppose," said he, on seeing that every one obeyed except the officer charged to watch him, "that your orders contain any objection this time?"

D'Artagnan felt almost triumphant as he uttered these words. This plan would be the salvation of his friends. With the blockade raised, they could embark immediately and sail for Spain or England unmolested. While they were escaping, D'Artagnan would go to the King, would base his justification of his return on the indignation aroused in him by the suspicions which Colbert had excited to his prejudice. Then he would be sent back with full powers, and would capture Belle-Isle; that is to say, would seize the cage after the birds had flown. But this scheme was brought to nought by a second order which the officer handed to him. It read thus:

"Should M. d'Artagnan show any intention of resigning, he is no longer to be regarded as commander of the expedition, and all officers placed under him are bound to refuse to obey him. Furthermore, the said Sieur d'Artagnan, having lost

his rank as head of the army sent against Belle-Isle, is ordered to start for France immediately, in company with the officer who hands him this message, and who is to consider the said Sieur d'Artagnan as his prisoner, for whom he is responsible."

Brave and nonchalant as was D'Artagnan's disposition, he turned pale. Everything had been calculated with a reach of thought that, for the first time in thirty years, recalled the profound clear-sightedness and the inflexible logic of the great cardinal. He leaned his head on his hand, weighing everything and hardly breathing.

"If I were to thrust this order into my pocket," he mused, "who could know, or who could prevent me. Before the King received any information of the matter, I might save the two poor fellows over yonder. Be bold, D'Artagnan; your head is not one of those that fall beneath the executioner's axe because of disobedience. I will disobey!"

But at the very moment he had come to this resolution he saw the officers around him reading copies of the order which had just been distributed among them by Colbert's infernal agent. The possibility of disobedience as well as everything else had been foreseen.

"Monsieur," said the officer, coming up to him, "I await your good pleasure; are you ready to start?"

"I am," replied the captain, grinding his teeth.

The officer immediately ordered a boat to be lowered for the reception of D'Artagnan. At this sight the musketeer was almost frantic with rage.

"But," he stammered, "who is to have the direction of the ships and forces?"

"After you are gone, monsieur," answered the commander of the ships, "the whole fleet is to be entrusted to me by the King."

"In that case, monsieur," interrupted Colbert's man, addressing the new leader, "the last order given me is for you. Let me see your powers, however."

"Here they are," said the sailor, exhibiting the royal signature.

"Well, here are your instructions," replied the officer, handing him a letter.

Then turning to D'Artagnan he said, in a voice that betrayed the deep emotion excited in him by the spectacle of the despair into which that iron-hearted man had sunk :

"Monsieur, will you do me the favor to come along with me?"

"Yes, immediately," articulated D'Artagnan, feebly, vanquished, utterly crushed by implacable necessity.

And he made his way languidly into the skiff, which, with both wind and tide in its favor, steered for the coast of France. The King's guards had embarked with him.

However, the musketeer was in hopes that he should reach Nantes early enough to plead with the King for his friends, and that he might have eloquence enough to do so successfully.

The bark flew along the waters like a swallow. At length D'Artagnan saw the land of France standing out distinctly in its blackness against the white clouds of the night.

"Ah! monsieur," he whispered to the officer, to whom he had not spoken for the last hour, "what would I not give to learn the nature of the instructions given to the new commander! They were peaceful, I hope? and —"

He did not finish. The echo of a distant cannon-shot rumbled along the surface of the waves, then another, then two or three with louder reverberations.

"They have opened fire on Belle-Isle," answered the officer.

The skiff had just touched French soil.

CHAPTER LXXII.

THE ANCESTORS OF PORTHOS.

AFTER D'Artagnan had left Aramis and Porthos, the two friends returned to the principal fort, in order to be able to converse with more freedom.

Porthos, who was still downcast, was a source of worry to Aramis, who had never felt his own intellect clearer.

"My dear Porthos," he broke in, "I am going to explain to you D'Artagnan's idea."

"What idea, Aramis?"

"An idea to which we shall owe our liberty before twelve hours."

"Really! you don't say so!" exclaimed Porthos, completely taken aback. "What is it?"

"You must have noticed, after seeing the scene between him and the officer, that he was very much put out by certain orders that concerned us?"

"Yes, I noticed that."

"Well, D'Artagnan will give in his resignation to the King. Then, during the confusion created by his absence, we can stand out to sea, or rather, you can, Porthos, if it be impossible for both of us to escape."

Porthos raised his head and answered:

"We'll escape together or stay here together, Aramis."

"Yours is a generous heart," said Aramis; "but your gloomy anxiety afflicts me."

"I am not anxious," replied Porthos.

"Then you are vexed with me?"

"I am not vexed with you."

"Then why do you look so dismal, Porthos?"

"I may as well tell you: I am making my will."

And honest Porthos, while speaking, gazed mournfully at his friend.

"Your will!" cried the bishop. "Oh, nonsense! Do you feel that you are going to die?"

"I feel that I am tired. It is the first time I have felt so, and there is a certain custom in our family."

"What is it, my friend?"

"My grandfather was twice as strong as I am."

"Oh!" exclaimed Aramis. "Why, your grandfather must have been Samson, then?"

"No, his Christian name was Antoine. Well, one day, when he was my age, just as he was about starting out hunting, he felt his legs growing weak, a man who had never been ill in his life."

"And what did that lead to, my friend?"

"To nothing pleasant, as you'll see. For when he was in the forest and still complaining of the feebleness of his legs, he met a boar. The boar faced him; he fired off his arquebuse, missed, and the beast ripped him up. He died immediately afterward."

"But that is no reason why you should be alarmed, Porthos."

"Oh, you'll see! My father was at one time quite as strong as I am. He was a stout-hearted soldier of Henri III. and

Henri IV. He was not named Antoine, though, but Gaspard, like M. de Coligny. He was always on horseback and had never known weariness. One evening his legs failed him, after rising from table."

"He had made a liberal use of the wine at supper; it is easy to see why he staggered."

"Bah! and he a friend of M. de Bassompierre? What nonsense! He was astonished at feeling so tired, and said to my mother, who was bantering him: 'I am really afraid I am about to encounter a boar, like the defunct M. du Vallon, my father did.'"

"Well?" asked Aramis.

"Well, my father determined to brave his weakness and go down into the garden instead of going to bed. He lost his footing at the first step; the stairs were steep; he fell against an iron projection in a corner of the staircase, and his skull was split open; he died on the very spot."

Aramis raised his eyes to his friend's face.

"These two circumstances are, indeed, extraordinary," said he, "but we must not infer that they are to be followed by a third. A man such as you are, my dear Porthos, should not be superstitious. Besides, what reason have you for saying your legs bend under you? Why, I have never seen you looking so erect and stately! You could carry a house on your shoulders."

"Oh, at present I feel hale and hearty, but not long ago I stumbled and grew weak, a phenomenon, as you would call it, which recurred four times. I do not say that this frightens me, but it vexes me; life is so pleasant. I have money, fine estates, horses that I love, friends that I love, too: D'Artagnan, Athos, Raoul, and you."

The incomparable Porthos did not even attempt to hide from Aramis the rank he held in his friendship.

Aramis pressed his hand.

"We have many years before us," said he, "many years to preserve for the world a few samples of rare men. Trust me, dear friend. There is no answer from D'Artagnan, it is a good sign. He must have given orders for drawing his ships together and freeing these waters from them. I have also given orders to have a boat brought on rollers down to the outlet of the great underground passage at Locmaria, the place, you know, where we so often have lain in wait for foxes."

"Yes, and which is connected with a little creek by a channel we discovered the day that splendid fox escaped us."

"Exactly. In case of misfortune we'll conceal a boat in that underground passage; in fact, it should be there already. We'll wait for a favorable moment during the night, and then — to sea."

"A capital idea; but what is the use of it?"

"The use of it is that no one knows of this grotto, or rather, this outlet, except two or three hunters living on the island; and that, if the island is occupied, the scouts, not perceiving any craft around the coast, will never suspect that any one can escape, and will stop watching."

"I understand."

"How are the legs now?"

"In excellent condition at present."

"You see, then, that everything conspires to give us rest and hope. D'Artagnan is sure to leave the sea free to us and give us an assured prospect of liberty. No more royal fleets or descents to be feared. *Vive Dieu!* we have any number of splendid adventures still before us, Porthos; and, if I reach Spain, I swear to you," added the bishop, with terrible energy, "your ducal patent is not so uncertain as people may think."

"Let us hope so," returned Porthos, somewhat cheered by his companion's warmth.

Suddenly a cry was heard:

"To arms!"

The cry, repeated by hundreds of voices, was borne into the chamber where the two friends were sitting, bringing surprise to one of them, anxiety to the other.

Aramis opened the window. He saw a great crowd with torches. Women were flying, and armed men were rushing to their posts.

"The fleet! the fleet!" cried a soldier, as soon as he recognized Aramis.

"The fleet?" asked the bishop.

"Within half a cannon-shot," continued the soldier.

"To arms!" cried Aramis.

"To arms!" repeated Porthos, in a voice of thunder.

And both ran to the mole so as to be sheltered behind the batteries.

Sloops, laden with soldiers, were seen approaching. They were taking three different directions, evidently intending to land at three different points at the same time.

"What ought to be done?" asked an officer on guard.

"Stop them; if they continue to come on, fire!" answered Aramis.

Five minutes later the cannonade began.

These were the shots heard by D'Artagnan when he touched the soil of France.

But the sloops were too close to the mole for the cannon to hit them. The soldiers landed, and then a fierce hand to hand conflict ensued.

"What is the matter with you, Porthos?" inquired Aramis of his friend.

"Oh, a mere nothing — my legs — it is really incomprehensible. But they will be all right when we charge."

And thereupon Porthos and Aramis charged with much vigor, and inspired their men with such valor, that the royalists reëmbarked in confusion, taking nothing with them except their wounded.

"But, Porthos, we must have a prisoner," cried Aramis, "quick!"

Porthos, bending over the steps of the mole, seized by the nape of the neck one of the officers of the royal army, just as he was waiting to follow his men into a gunboat. The giant's arm raised aloft this prey, which served him as a buckler, for not a single shot was fired at him.

"Here is your prisoner," said Porthos to Aramis.

"Good!" cried the latter, laughing. "Now will you calumniate your legs!"

"But I did not catch him with my legs," answered Porthos, dejectedly, "it was with my arm."

CHAPTER LXXIII.

THE SON OF BISCARRAT.

THE Bretons of the island were quite proud of their victory. Aramis, however, had no words of encouragement for them.

"What is going to happen," said he, when everybody had returned, "is that the anger of the King will revive after he hears of our resistance, and these honest folk will be decimated

or blown to atoms as soon as the island is captured; and captured it is sure to be."

"So that," rejoined Porthos, "all we have done is useless."

"No, not useless, for the time, at least," replied the bishop. "We have a prisoner, and he must tell us what our enemies are preparing for us."

"Yes, we must question the prisoner," said Porthos, "and we can easily make him speak. We are going to supper, let us invite him; he'll talk when he drinks."

Which was done. The officer, a little uneasy at first, felt reassured when he saw the persons with whom he had to deal. Not being afraid of compromising himself, he entered into the full particulars of D'Artagnan's resignation and departure. He explained how, after this departure, the new leader of the expedition had ordered a sudden attack on Belle-Isle. But there his explanations rested.

The look exchanged by Aramis and Porthos was sufficient testimony to their despair. It was useless thinking of banking on the ingenious imagination of D'Artagnan now; consequently there was no resource in case of defeat.

Aramis, continuing his interrogatories, asked what was likely to happen to the leaders in Belle-Isle.

"The orders are," replied the prisoner, "to give them no quarter in battle and to hang them if they survive."

Aramis and Porthos again exchanged glances. The blood surged to the faces of both.

"I am rather a light weight for the gibbet," answered Aramis; "people like me are not hanged."

"And I am rather too heavy for it; people like me break the rope," said Porthos.

"I am sure," returned the prisoner, courteously, "we shall be able to procure for you the kind of death you are partial to."

"A thousand thanks," replied Aramis, with the utmost seriousness.

Porthos bowed. "Allow me to drain this bumper to your health," said he, drinking.

They touched on different subjects, and the conversation was prolonged. The officer, who was clever and vivacious, gradually fell under the influence of the wit of Aramis and the good-natured cordiality of Porthos.

"Pardon me," said the officer, "if I ask you a question; but those who have reached their sixth bottle may be excused for forgetting themselves a little."

"Ask what you like," answered Porthos.

"Speak," assented Aramis.

"Were you not, gentlemen, among the musketeers of the late King?"

"Yes, monsieur, and among the best of them, too, if I may be allowed to say so," replied Porthos.

"You speak truly; I would even say the best soldiers in the whole world, were I not afraid of offending the memory of my father."

"Of your father?" cried Aramis.

"Do you know my name?"

"*Ma foi!* no, monsieur; but you must tell me it, and —"

"I am called Georges de Biscarrat."

"Oh!" cried Porthos, "Biscarrat! Don't you remember that name, Aramis?"

"Biscarrat! Biscarrat!" mused the bishop. "It seems to me that —"

"Try to recall it, monsieur," said the officer.

"*Pardieu!* it won't take me long," exclaimed Porthos. "Biscarrat, — known also as Cardinal — he was one of the four who interrupted us, sword in hand, on the day we made D'Artagnan's acquaintance."

"Exactly, gentlemen."

"The only one of them," continued Porthos, "whom we did not wound."

"And consequently he must have been anything but an indifferent swordsman," said the prisoner.

"True! quite true!" cried both the friends in unison. "*Ma foi!* M. de Biscarrat, we are delighted to make the acquaintance of so worthy a gentleman."

Biscarrat shook the hands extended to him by the two ex-musketeers.

Aramis eyed Porthos with a look that meant: "That man will aid us!" He said, immediately afterward: "You will acknowledge, monsieur, that it is a great satisfaction to a person to have always been a man of honor."

"So my father always said, monsieur."

"And you will also acknowledge that you must find it rather saddening to meet persons destined to be shot or hanged,

and then discover that these persons are old acquaintances, — indeed, old hereditary acquaintances.”

“Oh, you are not reserved for such a dreadful fate, my friends,” replied the young man, warmly.

“Pshaw! you said so yourself.”

“When I said so I did not know you. Now that I do know you, I say that you can avoid that terrible destiny if you wish.”

“What! if we wish?” cried Aramis, whose eyes gleamed with the light of intelligence as he looked alternately at his prisoner and at Porthos.

“Provided,” said Porthos, as he looked at them also with noble intrepidity, “that we are not asked to do anything base.”

“You will not be asked to do anything at all,” replied the officer of the royal army. “What do you want to be asked to do? If you are found you will be killed; that is already settled. Try, then, not to be found!”

“I do not think I am mistaken in saying,” rejoined Porthos, with dignity, “that those who wish to find us must come here to seek us.”

“You are perfectly right, my worthy friend,” returned Aramis, with his questioning eyes riveted on the face of Biscarrat, who sat silent and reserved. “You would tell us something, M. de Biscarrat, show us some opening, but you dare not; is not that the case?”

“Ah! my friends, if I did so, I should betray my orders. But hold! I hear a voice that liberates mine by reducing it to subjection.”

“Cannon!” cried Porthos.

“Cannon and musketry!” exclaimed the bishop.

From the distance, far away among the rocks, came a dull, rumbling sound, the noise of battle, and of a battle that was soon over.

“What is that?” inquired Porthos.

“Ah! *pardieu!*” cried Aramis, “it is as I suspected.”

“What did you suspect?” asked the officer.

“The attack you made was only a feint, was it not, monsieur? And while you allowed your companies to be repulsed, you were making an attack on another point in the island.”

“Oh, on several other points, monsieur.”

“Then we are ruined,” said the Bishop of Vannes, calmly.

“Ruined! that is possible,” observed the Seigneur de Pierrefonds, “but we are neither taken nor hanged.”

And with these words he rose from table, approached the wall, and coolly took down his sword and pistols, which he inspected with all the care of the veteran who is ever ready for battle and feels that his life, in a great measure, depends on the excellence and good condition of his weapons.

At the roar of the cannon and the tidings of a surprise which might deliver the island into the hands of the royal troops, the crowd hurried in dismay into the fort. It came to demand help and advice from its leaders.

Aramis, pale and downcast, stood between two torches at the window which opened on the great court, now thronged with soldiers awaiting his orders, and with terrified islanders imploring his aid.

"My friends," said M. d'Herblay, in a grave and sonorous voice, "M. Fouquet, your protector, your friend, your father, has been arrested by the King's order and thrown into the Bastille."

A prolonged and menacing cry of rage mounted up to the window at which the bishop was stationed, and enfolded him like some vibrating fluid.

"Let us avenge M. Fouquet!" cried those of the crowd who were most excited. "Death to the royalists!"

"No, my friends," replied Aramis, solemnly, "no, no resistance. The King is the master of his kingdom. The King is the mandatory of God. God and the King have stricken M. Fouquet. Humble yourselves before the hand of God. Love God and the King, who have stricken M. Fouquet. But do not avenge your seigneur, do not try to avenge him. You would sacrifice yourselves in vain, you would sacrifice your wives and children, your property and your liberty. Down with your arms, my friends! down with your arms! The King commands you to lay down your arms; obey him and retire peacefully to your dwellings. I ask, I beseech, and, if need be, I command you to do so, in M. Fouquet's name."

The crowd, packed beneath the window, gave vent to a long groan of anger and fright.

"The soldiers of King Louis XIV. have entered Belle-Isle," continued Aramis. "A struggle between them and you would no longer be a battle, it would be a massacre. Go, go, and forget; this time I command you in the name of the Lord!"

The mutineers withdrew, slowly indeed, but silently and submissively.

"Why, what is this you have done, my friend?" asked Porthos.

"Monsieur," said Biscarrat, "you are saving all these people, but you are not saving yourself and your friend."

"M. de Biscarrat," answered the prelate, in a tone of singular elevation and courtesy, "be good enough to resume possession of your liberty."

"I am anxious to do so, monsieur, but —"

"But you may render me a service; for by informing the King's lieutenant of the submission of the islanders, you may also obtain some indulgence for us, especially if you bring to his notice the methods by which that submission was realized."

"Indulgence!" cried Porthos, with flaming eyes; "indulgence! What does that word mean?"

Aramis roughly hit his friend's elbow; it had been a habit of his to do so in the glorious days of their youth whenever he wished to warn Porthos against the commission of some blunder. Porthos understood, and became at once as silent as the grave.

"Then I shall leave you, gentlemen," said Biscarrat, also somewhat surprised at hearing the word "indulgence" from the lips of the haughty musketeer whose heroic exploits had aroused his enthusiasm.

"Yes, leave us, M. de Biscarrat," replied Aramis, bowing, "and take with you the expression of our deepest gratitude."

"But, gentlemen, in the meantime, what is going to become of you, whom I feel it an honor to be able to call my friends, since you have in your great kindness permitted me to do so?" returned the officer, deeply affected on bidding adieu to the two men who had once been the adversaries of his father.

"We'll remain here."

"But, *mon Dieu!* the order is formal!"

"I am the Bishop of Vannes, M. de Biscarrat, and in these days it is as unusual to shoot bishops as to hang gentlemen."

"Yes, monsieur; yes, monseigneur," returned Biscarrat, "you have that chance left you still. Well, I must take my leave, I will repair to the commander of the expedition, the King's lieutenant. Adieu, gentlemen, or rather, *au revoir!*"

Whereupon the good officer jumped on a horse given him by Aramis, and galloped in the direction of the firing which they had just heard, and which by bringing such a crowd of people into the fort had interrupted the conversation of the two friends with their prisoner.

Aramis looked after him for a time, and now that he was alone with Porthos :

"Well, do you understand?" said he.

"*Ma foi!* no!"

"Did you not feel that the presence of Biscarrat was an annoyance?"

"No; he is quite a nice young fellow."

"Yes, but what about the grotto of Locmaria? Do you think it would be wise for us to let everybody know about it?"

"Ah! you are right, you are always right; I understand now."

"I'm glad you do," replied Aramis, joyfully. "Forward, friend Porthos! Our boat is waiting for us, and the King has not caught us yet."

CHAPTER LXXIV.

THE GROTTA OF LOCMARIA.

THE cavern of Locmaria was so far away from the mole that to reach it the two friends were obliged to husband their strength. Moreover, it was growing very dark; the clock in the fort was striking twelve. Porthos and Aramis were loaded with arms and money. They walked across the moor between the mole and the cave, listening to every sound, on their guard against every ambush.

Now and then fugitives passed by the road on their left, — which they were careful to avoid, — who had evidently fled from the interior on hearing of the arrival of the royal troops.

Aramis and Porthos, concealed behind some boulder or other, listened intently to the words that escaped the lips of these poor people, trembling as they jogged along their pathway, carrying with them their most precious possessions. The two friends hoped these peasants might let something drop in the course of their lamentations which would subserve their own interests.

At length, after a rapid march, frequently interrupted, however, by prudent halts, they reached the deep grottoes into which

the provident care of the Bishop of Vannes had caused a boat to be rolled on cylinders — an excellent boat, too, quite capable of keeping the sea in such fine weather.

“My good friend,” said Porthos, after breathing obstreperously, “we have arrived, apparently. But I think I heard you speak of three men, three servants of yours that were to accompany us. I do not see them. Where are they?”

“How could you see them, my dear Porthos?” replied Aramis. “They are certainly waiting for us in the cavern, and I have no doubt are taking some repose after their rough and difficult task.”

Aramis stopped Porthos, who was about to enter the cavern.

“Will you kindly allow me to pass in before you?” said he to the giant. “I know the signal that must be given to our men; if they should not hear it they would, very likely, fire, or fling their knives at you in the darkness.”

“Do so, by all means, my dear Aramis; your wisdom and prudence cannot be equalled. And, to tell the truth, that tired sensation I spoke to you about has got hold of me again.”

Aramis left Porthos sitting at the entrance to the grotto, and, bending his head, penetrated into the interior, imitating the hoot of an owl as he did so.

A little plaintive cooing, a sound almost indistinct, answered back from the depths of the cave.

Aramis felt his way along very cautiously, but was soon brought to a halt by the same cry he had first heard, and this cry was now within ten yards of him.

“Are you there, Yves?” inquired the bishop.

“Yes, monseigneur. Goennec is here also, as well as his son.”

“Good. Is everything ready?”

“Yes, monseigneur.”

“Go to the entrance of the grotto, my good Yves, with your two friends; there you will find the Seigneur de Pierrefonds, who is resting, as our long journey has fatigued him. If he is unable to walk take him up and bring him here.”

The three Bretons obeyed. But the bishop's injunction to his three servants was not needed. Porthos had soon felt as strong as ever, and was now, in fact, making the descent. His heavy footsteps were already resounding through the cavities formed and supported by the pillars of silex and granite.

As soon as the Seigneur de Pierrefonds had come up with the bishop, the Bretons lit the lantern they had brought with them,

and Porthos assured his friend that he felt quite as strong as usual.

"Then let us go to the canoe and find out what it contains."

"Do not bring the light too close to it, monseigneur," said Yves, "for in obedience to your directions I placed in the coffer you know of, under the bench of the poop, the barrel of powder and the musket charges you sent from the fort."

"Very well," answered Aramis.

And taking the lantern in his hand he made a minute inspection of all the parts of the boat, with the precautions of a man who knows there is danger, but does not fear it.

The canoe was long and light, drew little water, had a slender keel, was in short one of the kind of boats that Belle-Isle has always been famous for building — somewhat high on the sides, solid on the water, easily handled, and furnished with planks which in unseasonable weather form a sort of deck often washed by the waves, but always affording shelter to the oarsmen.

In two tightly shut coffers resting under the poop and prow Aramis found bread, biscuit, dried fruit, a fitch of bacon, and a good supply of water in leather bottles, rations sufficient for persons who intended to hug the coast, and could always revictual when it was necessary. The weapons — eight muskets and as many pistols — were in good condition and all loaded. There were additional oars in case of accident, and the boat was furnished also with the little sail known as the *trinquette*, which adds to the swiftness of the craft when the boatmen are rowing, is so useful whenever there is a breeze, and is so light that it is no burden to the bark that carries it.

Aramis scrupulously examined everything and was perfectly satisfied with the result of the inspection.

"And now, my dear Porthos," said he, "we must consider carefully whether we ought to try to get the boat out through the other end of the grotto, with which we are unacquainted, by following the downward slope of the cavern in darkness, or whether we ought to make it slide upon rollers in the open air over the heath; in that case we may have to remove the brushwood on the path to the cliff, which is not twenty feet high, and which has three or four fathoms of water at its base — as well as a solid bottom — when the tide is in."

"Of course it shall be as you wish, monseigneur," answered the boatman respectfully; "but I don't think we'll be able to

manage the passage of the boat down the slope in the darkness as successfully as we could on a path in the open air. I am well acquainted with the cliff, and I assure you that the surface is as level as that of a grass plot in a garden. On the other hand, the inside of the grotto is very rough, not to speak of the likelihood of our finding at the end of it a narrow passage leading to the sea, through which we might not succeed in getting the boat."

"I have made my calculations," answered the bishop, "and I am quite certain it can go through."

"Very well, I wish it may, monseigneur; but," persisted the boatman, "you are well aware, monseigneur, that before we reach the end of this narrow passage we must raise an enormous rock, — the one the fox always escapes under, — which shuts it up like a door."

"Oh, that's nothing," said Porthos, "we'll raise it."

"I know you have the strength of half a score of men, monseigneur," answered Yves, "but all this is likely to give a good deal of trouble to monseigneur."

"I believe the boatman is right," said Aramis. "Let us try what we can do in the open air."

"A still stronger reason for doing so, monseigneur," continued the fisherman, "is the fact that we cannot embark before daylight, on account of all the work that has yet to be done, and as soon as daylight appears, we must have a first-rate watchman stationed somewhere above the grotto to keep an eye on the manœuvres of the transports and cruisers which are on the lookout for us; this is absolutely necessary."

"Yes, Yves, your reasoning is unanswerable; so let us pass by the cliff."

The three stout Bretons set about putting the rollers under the boat for the purpose of starting it, when the distant barking of dogs was heard, evidently coming from the interior of the island. Aramis, followed by Porthos, rushed out of the cavern.

The dawn was tingeing with its purple and pearly hues the billows and the plains. In the faint light the stunted pines could be discerned waving their foliage above the rocks, and long flocks of crows were skimming with their black wings over the scanty fields of buckwheat. In another quarter of an hour it would be full daylight; the birds, already awakened from their slumbers, were joyously heralding its approach in their melodious songs.

The barking which had arrested the three fishermen in their efforts to move the boat, and had hurried Aramis and Porthos outside the cave, was now heard in one lengthening echo from a deep gorge about three miles distant.

"It is a pack of hounds," said Porthos ; "the dogs are upon a scent."

"What does it mean? Who can be hunting at such a time?" murmured Aramis.

"And in this direction particularly, for every one in the neighborhood must be dreading the arrival of the royalists," continued Porthos.

"The baying is nearer to us. Yes, you are right, Porthos, the dogs are on the scent. But," cried Aramis, suddenly, "come here, Yves ; this way, Yves!"

Yves came running up to them, after dropping the cylinder he was placing under the boat when the summons of the bishop had interrupted him in his task.

"Yves, how is it that people are hunting on such a day as this?" asked Porthos.

"Oh, monseigneur, I can make nothing of it," replied the Breton. "The Seigneur de Locmaria would be the last person to hunt at such a moment. He would, indeed ; and besides the dogs —"

"Might have escaped from the kennel."

"No," said Goennec, "these are not the Seigneur de Locmaria's dogs."

"It would be prudent for us to return to the grotto," counselled Aramis ; "evidently we shall soon know what we have to expect, for the barking and shouting are nearer."

They entered the cavern ; but before they had gone a hundred steps in the darkness, a sound like the hoarse sigh of some creature in distress echoed through the vaults ; and gasping and terrified, a fox darted like a flash of lightning past the fugitives, leaped over the boat and vanished, leaving behind a pungent odor which floated for a few seconds under the low roof of the grotto.

"The fox!" cried the Bretons, with the joyous surprise felt by hunters on such an occasion.

"We must be under a curse!" cried the bishop ; "our retreat is discovered."

"Discovered by a fox! What harm can that do us?" asked Porthos.

"Ah! my friend, do you not know that after the fox come the dogs and that after the dogs come the men?"

Porthos hung his head.

As if to confirm the bishop's words, the yelping pack came along with frightful speed on the trail of the animal. Half a dozen beagles started at that very moment across the moor, a roar of voices behind them that resembled the triumphant blare of trumpets.

"There are the dogs, plain enough," said Aramis, who was watching behind a chink between two rocks. "Who are the hunters?"

"If it be the Seigneur de Locmaria," replied the boatman, "he will not enter the grotto himself, but let the dogs rummage it, for he knows what they can do; and since he is certain that the fox must come out at the other end, he'll take up his post there."

"It is not the Seigneur de Locmaria who is hunting," said the bishop, who had turned pale in spite of himself.

"Who is it, then?" asked Porthos.

"Look."

Porthos placed his eye at the crevice, and saw a dozen horsemen on the top of a hillock; they were urging their horses on the track of the dogs, and hallooing as loud as they could.

"The guards!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, my friend, the King's guards."

"Do you say the King's guards, monseigneur?" cried the Bretons, turning pale also.

"And Biscarrat at their head, mounted on my gray horse," continued Aramis.

At that very instant the dogs swept into the grotto like an avalanche, and the depths of the cavern were filled with their deafening howls.

"Ah! *diable!*" muttered Aramis, recovering his ordinary composure in presence of a danger that was certain and inevitable, "I know well that we are lost; still, we have a single chance. If the guards, who are sure to follow their dogs, happen to discover there is an issue to the grotto, there is no further hope for as soon as they are inside they will perceive the boat and ourselves also. The dogs, therefore, must never get out; their masters must never get in."

"Nothing could be clearer," assented Porthos.

"You understand the situation," added the bishop, with the rapid precision of a born leader; "there are six dogs; they will be stopped by the big stone under which the fox slipped; the opening is too narrow to permit them to go through it; there they must be killed."

The Bretons sprang forward, knives in hand.

A few minutes later there was a lamentable concert of dying groans and howls; then all was still.

"Well done," said Aramis, coldly. "Now for their masters!"

"What are we to do?" asked Porthos.

"Wait till they enter, then conceal ourselves and slay them."

"Slay them?" repeated Porthos.

"There are at least sixteen of them now," said Aramis.

"And well armed," added Porthos, smiling, for this thought consoled him somewhat.

"The affair will be over in ten minutes," said Aramis. "To work!"

And with a resolute air he took up a musket and placed his hunting-knife between his teeth.

"Yves, Goennec, and his son," he went on, "will pass us the muskets. You, Porthos, will fire at close range. We are certain to bring down eight before the others have any suspicion. Then the five of us must despatch the last eight with our knives."

"And what about poor Biscarrat?" asked Porthos.

Aramis reflected for a moment.

"Biscarrat first of all," he answered coldly. "He knows us."

CHAPTER LXXV.

THE GROTTTO.

DESPITE the divining power which was the most remarkable phase of D'Herblay's character, the upshot of the adventure, being subject to the vicissitudes of events in which chance plays a part, was different from what he had anticipated.

Biscarrat, better mounted than his companions, was the first to arrive at the entrance to the grotto; he saw clearly that

both fox and hounds must have been engulfed in it. But, stricken by that superstitious terror with which every gloomy cavern naturally affects the human mind, he halted outside, and waited until his companions should come up with him.

"What is the matter?" asked the young men, all out of breath, and at a loss to account for his inaction.

"Why, we cannot hear the dogs. Both they and the fox must be buried in the cave."

"They have kept too close to the scent," said a guardsman, "to have suddenly lost trace of it. Besides, if they had we'd hear them yelping from some quarter or other. Yes, Biscarrat is right; they are in that grotto."

"But in that case," said another, "how is it they do not give tongue?"

"It's queer," added a third.

"Well," asked a fourth, "why do we not enter the grotto? There's no law against it, I fancy."

"No," replied Biscarrat; "but it's as black as hell, and a fellow might easily break his neck."

"Witness the dogs," said a guardsman; "it looks as if they had broken theirs."

"What the devil has become of them?" asked the young men in chorus.

And each of the masters called his dog by name, and whistled the note it knew; but there was no response to either call or whistle.

"Maybe the grotto is enchanted. Let us see."

And jumping off his horse, he advanced a step inside the cavern.

"Wait, wait, I'll go with you," cried one of the guardsmen, just as Biscarrat was about to disappear in the darkness.

"No," answered Biscarrat, "something extraordinary must have happened. We mustn't risk ourselves all at once. If you don't hear from me in ten minutes, come in, and come in all together."

"Just as you like," replied the young men, who, for that matter, did not see that the enterprise of Biscarrat was attended with any great danger; "we'll wait for you."

And without dismounting, they formed a circle round the grotto.

Biscarrat entered alone, and felt his way through the darkness until he struck against the musket of Porthos.

The resistance his chest encountered astonished him. He stretched out his hand, and seized the icy barrel.

At the same instant Yves raised a knife over the young man; it was about to fall upon him with all the strength of a Breton's arm, when the iron wrist of Porthos stopped it on its way.

Then, like the sullen rumbling of thunder, these words sounded through the darkness:

"I will not have him killed."

So Biscarrat found himself between a man who protected him and a man who threatened him; his position was almost as terrible in the one case as in the other.

Brave as the young man was, he could not keep back a cry, which was stifled by a handkerchief Aramis pressed against his mouth.

"M. de Biscarrat," said the latter, in a low voice, "we do not wish to do you any harm, and you must be aware of that, if you have recognized us; but at the first word, the first sigh, the first breath, we shall be compelled to kill you as we have killed your dogs."

"Yes, I recognize you," whispered the young man. "But why are you here? What are you doing? Unhappy men! I believed you to be still in the fort."

"And you were to have obtained terms for us, monsieur, if I am not mistaken?"

"I did everything I could, gentlemen; but —"

"But?"

"The orders are positive."

"To put us to death?"

Biscarrat did not answer. How was he to speak of the cord to gentlemen like these?

Aramis understood his silence.

"M. de Biscarrat," said he, "you would have been already dead had we not respected your youth and our former intimacy with your father. We permit you to withdraw on condition that you swear you will not mention what you have seen to your companions."

"Not only do I swear that I will not speak of it, but I swear also to do all I possibly can to hinder my comrades from setting a foot inside this grotto."

"Biscarrat! Biscarrat!" shouted a number of voices, their cries roaring through the cavern like a whirlwind.

"Answer," said Aramis.

"Here I am!" Biscarrat shouted back.

"Go, we rely on your loyalty," said Aramis.

And he released the young man, who hurried in the direction of the light.

"Biscarrat! Biscarrat!" cried the voices nearest to him.

And the shadows of several human forms were projected into the interior of the cavern.

Biscarrat sprang towards his friends to stop them, and came up with those of them who had just ventured inside the grotto.

Aramis and Porthos were listening with the strained attention of men whose life depends on a breath of air.

Biscarrat had now got to the entrance, followed by his friends.

"Oh! oh!" cried one of them on coming into the light, "how pale you are!"

"Pale!" cried another; "why, he is livid!"

"I?" inquired the young man, trying to regain his self-possession.

"But in Heaven's name what has happened to you?" asked every one.

"My poor friend! why, you have n't a drop of blood in your veins!" said one of his comrades, laughing.

"Gentlemen, this is serious," another added; "he is going to faint. Have none of you smelling salts?"

And there was a roar of laughter.

All these questions and witticisms crossed one another around Biscarrat, like bullets fired in a skirmish. But his composure had returned while his friends were badgering him.

"Why, what do you fancy I saw?" he asked. "I was awfully heated when I entered the grotto, and then got a chill from the cold. That's all there's to it."

"But have you seen the dogs or heard them? Have you any news about them?"

"They must have gone another way, I imagine," said Biscarrat.

"Gentlemen," said one of the young fellows, "the singularity of what has just occurred, the pallor and silence of our friend, betray the existence of a mystery which Biscarrat will not, or, perhaps, cannot reveal. Of one thing we may be sure:

Biscarrat has seen something in yonder grotto. Well, I am curious to see it too, though it were the devil. To the grotto, gentlemen! to the grotto!"

"To the grotto!" repeated every voice.

And the echo of these words: "To the grotto! to the grotto!" came, big with menace, to the ears of Aramis and Porthos.

Biscarrat threw himself before his comrades.

"Gentlemen!" he cried, "gentlemen, for God's sake do not enter!"

"But what is there so appalling in that cavern?" inquired several of his fellow-officers.

"Come, now, let us know, Biscarrat."

"There's no doubt of it! He saw the devil!" said the person who had already advanced the same hypothesis.

"Then, if he has," cried another, "he must n't be so selfish, and keep us from seeing him also."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, in the name of Heaven!" persisted Biscarrat.

"Stand aside, let us pass."

"Gentlemen, do not enter, I beseech you!"

"Why, how is it that you have entered, then?"

Thereupon an officer, much older than the others, who had until now remained behind them and said nothing, advanced.

"Gentlemen," said he, with a calmness that offered a contrast to the excitement of his companions, "there is yonder some one or something which is not the devil, but which, at all events, has been powerful enough to silence our dogs. We must learn what the some one or something is."

Biscarrat made a last effort to stop his friends; but that effort was useless. In vain did he fling himself before the most headstrong; in vain did he cling to the rocks and try to bar their passage, the young men rushed into the cavern in the wake of the officer who had been the last to speak, but was the first to spring towards the unknown danger, sword in hand.

Biscarrat, repulsed by his friends and unable to follow them, unless he were content to be regarded as a traitor and perjurer by Aramis and Porthos, leaned, his ears strained, his hands still supplicating, against the jagged side of a rock, a spot he deemed likely to be exposed to the fire of the musketeers.

As for the guardsmen, they penetrated farther and farther, their shouts growing fainter as they plunged into the remoter recesses of the cavern.

Suddenly there was a discharge of musketry, exploding under the vaults like the sullen, rumbling sound of a thunderclap. Two or three balls were flattened on the rock against which Biscarrat was leaning. At the same time groans and howls and curses rose upon the air, and the little band of gentlemen fell back, some pale, some bleeding, all enveloped in a cloud of smoke which the air outside seemed to be drawing away from the depths of the cave.

"Biscarrat! Biscarrat!" cried the fleeing soldiers, "you knew there was an ambuscade in the cavern, and you did not warn us."

"Biscarrat! you are the cause of the death of four of us; woe to you, Biscarrat!"

"You are the cause of my death, for I am dying," said one of the young men, gathering up his blood in his hand and flinging it in Biscarrat's face; "my blood be on your head!"

And he rolled in agony at his comrade's feet.

"At least tell us who is yonder?" cried several furious voices.

Biscarrat was silent.

"Tell us or die!" shrieked the wounded man, rising on his knee and lifting against his companion a hand that held a useless sword.

Biscarrat came close to him and bared his breast for the stroke; but the wounded man fell back, heaving his last sigh, never to rise again.

Biscarrat, with hair on end and haggard eyes, rushed like one possessed to the entrance crying:

"You are right, death to him who has let his comrades be assassinated! I am a base wretch!"

And throwing away his sword, for he was resolved to die without defending himself, he rushed headlong into the cavern. The rest of the young men sprang after him. There were eleven of them; they too plunged into the gulf.

But they did not go farther than had gone the first; a second discharge stretched five of them on the cold sand, and as it was impossible to see from whence this murderous thunder proceeded, the others recoiled with a feeling of consternation that can be better imagined than described.

Biscarrat did not fly; he remained seated on a ledge, still safe and sound, and waited.

There were but six gentlemen left.

"Seriously," said one of the survivors, "do you believe it is the devil?"

"*Ma foi!* something far worse," was the answer.

"Let us ask Biscarrat; he knows."

"Where are you, Biscarrat?"

The young men looked round, and saw that Biscarrat had made no response to the call.

"He is dead!" cried two or three voices.

"No," answered another, "I saw him with my own eyes, sitting coolly on a rock. He is in the cavern, and waiting for us."

"He is acquainted, I fancy, with those who are in the grotto."

"Why, how could that be?"

"He was taken prisoner by the rebels."

"Well, we must call him, and learn from him with whom we have to deal."

And every one shouted: "Biscarrat! Biscarrat!"

There was no answer.

"No matter," said the officer who had exhibited such composure during the whole affair, "we can do without his assistance now. Look, reinforcements are arriving."

He was right. A company of the guards, outstripped by its officers in the ardor of their chase, and consisting of about seventy-five or eighty men, was advancing, led by their captain and first lieutenant. The five officers ran to meet their men, and, in language the eloquence of which may be easily conceived, related their adventure and asked their help.

The captain interrupted them.

"Where are your comrades?" he inquired.

"Dead!"

"But there were sixteen of you."

"Ten are dead, Biscarrat is in the cavern, and there are five of us here."

"Then Biscarrat is a prisoner?"

"No, for he is yonder; look."

In fact, Biscarrat at this moment made his appearance at the entrance of the grotto.

"He is beckoning us to advance," said the officers. "Forward!"

"Forward!" repeated the soldiers.

And they marched to meet Biscarrat.

"Monsieur," said the captain, addressing him, "I have been assured that you know the men who are making such a desperate resistance in that cavern. I summon you, in the King's name, to declare what you know."

"Captain," answered Biscarrat, "a summons is no longer needed. I have been released from my pledge, and I come in the name of these men."

"To tell me they surrender?"

"To tell you they will defend themselves to the death, if you do not grant them terms."

"How many of them are there?"

"Two."

"Two! and they wish to impose conditions?"

"Two who have already killed ten."

"What kind of people are they, then? giants?"

"Better than that. Do you remember the story of the Bastion Saint-Gervais, captain?"

"Yes, where four of the King's musketeers held out against a whole army?"

"Well, these men were two of the same musketeers."

"Their names?"

"At that time they were known as Porthos and Aramis. To-day they are called M. d'Herblay and M. du Vallon."

"But what interest have they in all this?"

"It was they who held Belle-Isle for M. Fouquet."

A murmur ran through the soldiers on hearing the words, "Porthos and Aramis."

"The musketeers! the musketeers!" they repeated.

And the idea that they were on the verge of a struggle with two of the oldest glories of the army sent a shiver, half of enthusiasm, half of terror, through the veins of these valiant youths. And, indeed, this was natural, for the names of D'Artagnan and Athos, Porthos and Aramis, were venerated by every one who wore a sword, just as in antiquity had been venerated the names of Theseus and Hercules, Castor and Pollux.

"Two men!" cried the officer, "and they have killed ten officers in two discharges! Impossible, M. de Biscarrat!"

"I forgot, captain, to tell you," answered Biscarrat, "that they may have two or three men with them, just as the defenders of the Bastion Saint-Gervais had three or four lackeys with them; but, captain, I have seen these men, have been their prisoner, I know them, and you may trust what I say. They are, I assure you, capable of destroying an entire division, and that without any assistance."

"We'll soon see if that be the case, and in a moment, too. Attention, gentlemen."

At this command no one moved, and all prepared to obey.

Biscarrat alone risked a last attempt.

"Monsieur," said he, in an undertone, "take my advice, let us pass on our way. Those two men, those two lions, you are about to attack, will defend themselves to the death. They have already slain ten of our men; they will slay double the number, and at last kill themselves rather than surrender. What shall we gain by fighting them?"

"This much we shall gain, monsieur: the consciousness of not having ordered eighty of the King's guards to retreat before two rebels. Were I to listen to your advice, monsieur, I should be a dishonored man, and by dishonoring myself I should dishonor the army. Forward, soldiers!"

And he led the way to the opening of the grotto.

There he halted.

The object of the halt was to give Biscarrat and his five comrades time to describe the interior. When he believed he had an adequate knowledge of the recesses of the cavern, he divided his company into three bodies, which were to enter after one another, and fire continuously in every direction. Doubtless the attack would cost them the loss of five more men, perhaps of ten; but assuredly the rebels must be ultimately captured, since there was no outlet, and, whatever happened, two men could not kill eighty.

"Captain," said Biscarrat, "I ask to be allowed to march at the head of the first platoon."

"As you wish. You can have that honor; it is a present which I make to you."

"Thanks," replied the young officer, with the firmness to be expected from a man of his race.

"Take your sword with you."

"I shall go as I am," answered Biscarrat. "I go to be killed, not to kill."

And taking his place at the head of the first platoon, bare-headed, and with folded arms :

“Forward, gentlemen!” said he.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

A HOMERIC EPIC.

WE must now pass into the other camp and describe the combatants and the field of battle.

When Aramis and Porthos had gone to the grotto of Locmaria, they expected to find their boat and their three Breton helpmates ready for departure. They had every hope that the little craft could be got through the outlet of the cavern, and that their labors and their flight could be hidden from every one. But the arrival of the fox and the dogs had forced them to keep under cover.

The grotto stretched for about two hundred yards to a little slope that ran down to a creek. In times of yore, when Belle-Isle was still called Calonesos, it was used as a temple of the pagan divinities, and many a human sacrifice had its recesses witnessed.

The first funnel-shaped shaft was entered by an easy descent, above which piles of rock formed a low arcade. The interior, which had a very uneven floor, and was rendered dangerous by the jagged rocks projecting from the roof at unequal distances, was subdivided into several compartments, connected with one another by means of rough, broken steps, fixed on the right and left in enormous natural pillars. In the third compartment the roof was so low, the passage so narrow, that the boat could hardly be even squeezed between the walls. Nevertheless, when men are desperate, wood softens, and stone becomes obedient to the breath of human will.

So thought Aramis when after the fight was over he decided upon flight, although to fly was assuredly a dangerous undertaking, since all his assailants were not dead, and since even if they did succeed in getting their bark out to sea, they should have to escape in full daylight under the gaze of their conquered foemen, who on seeing their small number would certainly feel strongly tempted to pursue the conquerors.

When the two discharges had killed ten men Aramis, accustomed to the windings of the cavern, started to inspect the corpses, and counted them one by one; then he ordered the canoe to be rolled up to the huge stone that closed the outlet to freedom. Porthos collected all his strength, took the boat in his arms, and lifted it up while the Bretons pushed along the rollers rapidly. They were now in the third compartment; they were in front of the stone that blocked their egress.

Porthos seized this gigantic stone at its base, and drove his robust shoulder against it with a momentum that made it crack. A cloud of dust fell from the roof with the ashes of ten thousand generations of sea-birds, whose nests clung like cement to the rock. At the third shock the stone trembled; its oscillations continued for about a minute. Porthos, propping himself against the next rock, used his foot as a crowbar, and pushed the block out of the calcareous masses which served it as cramps and hinges. The stone fell, and daylight appeared, rushing into the cavern through the open doorway in all its radiant splendor, and the blue sea was revealed to the eyes of the delighted Bretons. To shove the boat over this barricade was their next task; there were only forty yards now between it and the ocean.

But it was at this very moment that the company of soldiers arrived, was drawn up by the captain, and made ready either for an escalade or an assault.

Aramis had his eye everywhere, so as to be able to coöperate with his friends in any quarter where his help was needed. He beheld the reënforcement, counted the number of the soldiers, was convinced at a glance of the hopeless peril in which a fresh struggle would involve them. Escape by sea at the very moment when the cavern was invaded? impossible! In fact, the light which now illuminated the two last compartments would betray to the soldiers the boat rolling towards the sea, as well as the two rebels within reach of their muskets, and a single one of their volleys would riddle the bark, if it did not kill the five navigators. Moreover, suppose the bark did get to sea with the men who manned her, would not the alarm be given? Would not a warning be sent to the royal fleet? Would not the frail craft, tracked on the ocean and spied from the shore, succumb before the close of day?

Aramis dug his hands furiously into his grizzled locks; he invoked the aid of Heaven; he invoked the aid of Hell! Calling Porthos, who was doing more work by his single self than rollers and boatmen together:

"My friend," he whispered, "our enemies have just been reënforced."

"Ah!" returned Porthos, tranquilly, "what ought we to do, then?"

"To begin the fight anew," answered Aramis, "is rather hazardous."

"Yes," said Porthos, "for it would be strange if they did not kill one of us, and certainly, if one of us be killed, the other will try to get killed also."

Porthos uttered these words with that heroic simplicity of his which grew greater in proportion to the greatness of the danger. They had the effect on Aramis that the spur has on a gallant charger.

"We shall neither of us be killed, if you do what I am about to tell you, friend Porthos."

"Well, tell me."

"These people are coming down into the grotto."

"Yes."

"We can kill fifteen of them, but not more."

"How many of them are there?"

"They have received a reënforcement of seventy-five men."

"Seventy-five and five — eighty — ah!" muttered Porthos.

"If they fire all at once, they will riddle us with bullets."

"Undoubtedly."

"Not to mention," added Aramis, "that the detonations may make the vault cave in in places."

"I should not wonder," said Porthos, "for just now a piece of rock fell on my shoulder and tore it a little."

"It did!"

"Oh! that's nothing."

"We must decide at once. Our Bretons will go on rolling the boat down to the sea."

"Very well."

"We two will keep the powder, the balls, and the muskets here."

"But we two can only fire two shots at a time. Your plan is a bad one," said Porthos, simply.

"Find me a better."

"I have found it!" exclaimed the giant, suddenly. "I will lie in wait behind the pillar with this iron bar, and, without being seen or being liable to be attacked, I can, when a crowd of them enters, drop my bar on their skulls thirty times in a single minute! Eh! what do you say to my plan? does it please you?"

"Excellent, my dear friend, perfect! I approve of it highly. But they will be dismayed, and the half of them may remain outside until they force us to die of sheer starvation. For that reason, my dear friend, we must destroy the entire company. If a single man survive, we are lost."

"You are right, my dear friend; but how can we persuade them to enter?"

"By not moving, Porthos."

"Well, let us not move — but when they are all together —"

"In that case, leave the matter in my hands; I have an idea."

"If that is so and your idea is a good one — but then, your ideas are always good, and I need not be uneasy."

"To your hiding place, Porthos, and count how many enter."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Don't mind me. I have my work cut out for me."

"I think I hear voices."

"It is they! To your post! Keep within reach of my voice and hand."

Porthos took his station in the second compartment, which was in absolute darkness.

Aramis stole into the third. The giant held an iron bar weighing fifty pounds in his hand. He handled this lever, which had been employed in rolling the boat, with marvellous ease.

During this time the Bretons were pushing the canoe toward the cliff.

Aramis was occupied with some very mysterious operation in the lighted compartment. An order given in a loud voice reached their ears. It was the last order of the officer in command. Thereupon twenty-five men leaped from the upper rocks in the first compartment of the grotto, and, having taken their ground, opened fire.

The echoes growled, the hissing of the balls cut the air, and a black smoke filled the vaults.

"To the left! to the left!" shouted Biscarrat, who, on his first visit to the cave, had observed the passage to the second chamber, and who, animated by the smell of powder, was determined to lead his soldiers in that direction.

The platoon accordingly hurried to the left; the passage gradually grew narrower. Biscarrat, with his hands extended, marched in front, a man who had devoted himself to death.

"Come on!" he shouted, "come on! I see light."

"Strike, Porthos!" cried the sepulchral voice of Aramis.

Porthos heaved a sigh, but he obeyed.

The bar of iron fell straight on the head of Biscarrat, who was dead before he could utter a cry. Then the terrible lever rose and fell ten times in ten seconds and made ten corpses.

The soldiers could see nothing; they heard groans and sighs; they stumbled over dead bodies and over one another; but, so far, they had no conception of the cause of all this. The implacable bar annihilated the first platoon, and there was not a sound to warn the second, which was calmly marching in its footsteps.

But this second platoon was commanded by the captain in person. He had pulled up one of the slender pines growing on the cliff, and, after twisting its resinous branches together, had converted it into a torch. When he reached the compartment in which Porthos, like the exterminating angel, had destroyed all who approached him, the first rank recoiled in consternation. No volley of musketry had answered theirs, and yet their progress was arrested by piles of corpses; they were literally walking in blood.

Porthos was still behind his pillar.

The captain, on beholding this awful carnage through the medium of the trembling light shed on it by the blazing pine, retreated to the pillar behind which Porthos was standing. Then a gigantic hand issued from the shade, and fastened on the captain's throat. A stifled rattle escaped from his lips; he beat the air with his outstretched arms; the torch fell from his hand and was extinguished in blood.

Before a second had elapsed, the captain's body fell beside the extinguished torch, adding one more corpse to the pile of corpses that blocked the way.

All this was accomplished as mysteriously as if it were the result of magic. On hearing the captain's death-rattle, the soldiers who accompanied him had turned round, had seen his extended arms, his eyes starting from their orbits. Then the torch fell, and they were plunged in darkness.

Moved by some instinctive, mechanical feeling, the lieutenant shouted :

"Fire!"

Immediately a volley of musketry rattled, thundered, howled through the cavern, bringing down masses of rock from the vaults. The cavern, lit up for a moment by this discharge, returned the next instant to a darkness that was rendered thicker by the smoke.

Then ensued a deathlike silence broken at length by the footsteps of the third platoon, now entering the grotto.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

A TITAN'S DEATH.

At that moment when Porthos, better accustomed to the darkness than all these men who had come out of the light, was looking around to see whether Aramis would make him any signal, he felt a gentle touch on his arm, and a voice as faint as a breath murmured in his ear :

"Come."

"Oh!" exclaimed Porthos.

"Hush!" replied Aramis, in a whisper.

And amid the noise made by the advance of the third platoon, amid the imprecations of the guards who still lived and the groans of those in the last agony, Aramis and Porthos slipped unperceived along the granite walls of the cavern.

Aramis guided Porthos into the compartment next the one at the end, and pointed to a barrel of gunpowder in a corner, weighing between sixty and eighty pounds, to which he had just tied a match.

"My friend," said he, "you will take this barrel when I have lit the match, and hurl it among our enemies. But are you able to do so?"



HIS FACE ILLUMINATED BY THE LIGHT OF THE MATCH GLIMMERING
IN THE DARKNESS.

"Well, I should think so!" replied Porthos. And he raised the little cask with one of his hands. "Light the match," he added.

"Wait till they're all close together," said Aramis, "and then, my Jupiter, launch your thunderbolt among them."

"Light it," repeated Porthos.

"I will join our Bretons and help them to get the boat to sea. I will wait for you on the shore. Throw it resolutely, and then hurry up to us."

"Light it," said Porthos for the last time.

"You understand everything I am saying?" asked Aramis.

"Oh, don't I, indeed!" with a loud laugh which he did not even try to restrain. "When a thing is made plain to me I always understand it; give me the tinder and away with you."

Aramis gave the burning touchwood to Porthos, who, as his hand was engaged, offered him his arm. Aramis shook the arm of Porthos with both his hands, and then made for the outlet where the three fishermen were waiting for him.

When Porthos was alone he bravely applied the tinder to the match. The tinder — but a tiny spark, yet capable of causing such a conflagration — shone in the dark like a firefly, then touched the match, and the light it created was soon blown into a strong flame by the vigorous breathing of Porthos.

The smoke had been thinned somewhat, and for a few seconds objects could be distinguished by the match's glare.

A brief yet magnificent spectacle was that of this giant, pale, bleeding, his face illuminated by the light of the match glimmering in the darkness.

The soldiers saw him, saw the barrel he held in his hand, saw the coming catastrophe. Then these men, dazed with terror at sight of what had been done, at the thought of what was about to be done, uttered one universal howl of agony. Some turned back to fly, but the advance of the third platoon barred the way; others took aim mechanically, and fired their unloaded muskets; others fell on their knees in prayer.

Three or four officers called out to Porthos promising him his liberty if he spared their lives. The lieutenant of the third platoon ordered his men to fire, but in front of them were their trembling comrades, serving Porthos as a living rampart.

We have already said that the flame produced by the breathing of Porthos on the touchwood and match lasted but a few seconds; but during these seconds this is what it illuminated: a giant, looming up still more colossal out of the darkness; a pile of bodies, bleeding, battered, crushed, the mass now and then lifted by the struggles of a poor wretch expiring in his agony, like some shapeless monster dying in the night, whose sides are distended by the stress of his last respiration. Every breath with which Porthos fanned the match painted this heap of corpses with a sulphurous hue, crossed with broad streaks of purple. Beyond the groups of soldiers who had met their fate where the chance of death or the surprise of a blow had stretched them, were some isolated corpses, their gaping wounds seeming to utter a menace. Above the blood-soaked floor rose, heavy and scintillant, the squat pillars of the cavern, the luminous parts of which stood out strongly from the warmly-toned shades.

And all this was seen by the tremulous glimmer of a match connected with a barrel of gunpowder, seen, as it were, by a torch that cast its rays over the dead of the past and the dead of the future.

The spectacle then lasted but a few minutes. During this short space of time an officer of the third platoon got together eight guardsmen armed with muskets and ordered them to fire on Porthos through an opening.

But those who received the order were so nervous and fired so wildly that three of their own men fell, and the five other balls went hissing to splinter the vault, plough the ground, or knock off pieces from the sides of the cavern.

A burst of laughter responded to this thunderous volley. Then the arm of the giant swung round, and a line of flame passed, like a falling star, through the air. The barrel, hurled a distance of thirty feet, cleared the barricade of corpses, and fell among a group of soldiers who, with a shriek, threw themselves flat on the ground.

The officer had followed the slender trail of light through the air. He leaped forward to tear the match from the barrel before it could reach the contents.

Useless sacrifice! The air had fanned the flame attached to the conductor. The match, which, if left to itself, might have burned for five minutes, was consumed in thirty seconds, and the infernal agent of destruction exploded.

Furious whirlwinds, hissings of sulphur and nitre, the blasting devastation of all-consuming fire, the appalling thunders of an explosion, were all present in that cavern, now as horrible as a cavern in hell. Rocks split like planks of deal beneath the axe. A jet of fire and smoke and fragments of stone spouted up from the centre of the grotto, widening as it ascended. The huge walls of silex tottered and fell upon the sand, and the sand itself, now hurled upward from its hard bed, was turned into an instrument of torture, riddling the face with its myriads of cutting atoms.

Cries, howls, curses, life itself, were all extinguished in one immense crash; the first three compartments became a gulf into which sank, according to its weight, the wreckage, vegetable, mineral, or human. Then the lighter sand and ashes fell in turn, spreading out like a grayish pall, and smoking over the dismal graves.

And now search in that burning sepulchre; search in that subterranean volcano; search for the guards of the King in their blue and silver-laced uniforms. Search for the officers brilliant in gold; search for the weapons that were to defend them; search for the stones that killed them; search for the ground that sustained them.

One solitary man has turned all this into a chaos more confused, shapeless, and terrible than that which existed before God had determined to create the world.

Of the three first compartments nothing was left, nothing which even God could have recognized as his handiwork.

After launching the barrel of gunpowder into the midst of his enemies, Porthos, in obedience to the directions of Aramis, had fled, and had reached the last compartment, into which air, light, and sunshine penetrated through the opening.

Therefore he had no sooner turned the corner that separated the third compartment from the fourth than he saw the boat dancing on the waves within a hundred paces of him. There were his friends; there was liberty; there was life after victory.

Just six of his long strides and he would be outside the vault; two or three vigorous spurts beyond the vault, and he would be at the boat.

Suddenly he felt his knees bending under him; they seemed powerless, and his legs, too, felt paralyzed.

"Oh! oh!" he murmured, in amazement, "that weariness

has got hold of me again; why, I can't walk! What does it mean?"

Aramis perceived him through the opening, and was wondering why he delayed.

"Come on, Porthos!" he cried; "come on!"

"Oh!" replied Porthos, straining his whole body in a useless effort, "I am not able."

And he fell upon his knees; but with his mighty hands he clung to a rock and raised himself up again.

"Quick! quick!" shouted Aramis, bending towards the shore, as if he would draw Porthos into his arms.

"In a moment," stammered Porthos, gathering all his strength for another step.

"In God's name, Porthos, come away at once! The barrel will explode in a second!"

"Come away, monseigneur!" cried the Bretons to Porthos.

But there was no longer time; there was a deafening roar, the ground yawned, the smoke that sprang up through the broad fissures hid the sky, the sea hurried away from the shore, as if chased by the breath of flame spouting from the grotto as from the jaws of some gigantic chimera; the tide carried the bark a distance of some forty yards from the beach, and all the rocks were shattered to their base, rent asunder as easily as blocks are under the hammer. A portion of the vault was carried up to the heavens, drawn thither as it were by invisible cables. The green and rose-colored flames of the sulphur, and the black lava of the argillaceous liquefactions wrestled together and fought for a moment under the majestic dome of smoke. Then long ridges of rock, which the violence of the explosion had not been able to uproot from their primeval pedestals, were seen to oscillate for one instant, lean over, and fall in succession; they seemed to bow to one another slowly like grave old men, before stretching themselves forever in their dusty tombs.

This appalling eruption apparently restored to Porthos the strength he had lost. He stood on his feet, a giant among these giants. But just as he was making his way between the double row of granite phantoms, the latter, no longer buttressed by their corresponding supports, came down crashing around this Titan, who looked as if he had been hurled down from Heaven among the rocks he had just launched against it.

Porthos felt the trembling of the soil beneath his feet, shaken as it was by this protracted convulsion. He spread out his vast hands to the right and left to repel the sinking rocks. A gigantic block on each side of him was kept back by these extended palms; but he bent his head, and another mass of granite fell between his shoulders.

For a moment the arms of Porthos had given way. Then this Hercules collected all his strength, and the two walls of the prison in which he was buried were slowly driven back and gave him room. For an instant he stood in this frame of granite like the ancient angel of chaos. But in repelling the lateral rocks, he had removed his point of support from the monolith lying on his shoulders, and pressing him down now with all its weight, it forced the giant to his knees. The lateral rocks, driven back for a time, again approached and added their tons to a weight that of itself would have sufficed to crush half a score of men.

The giant fell without raising a cry for help; he fell while answering Aramis with words of encouragement and cheer; for, thanks to those powerful buttresses, his hands, he might hope, like another Enceladus, to shake off this triple load. But Aramis soon perceived that the block was sinking, perceived that the hands and arms, braced for a last effort, were giving way, perceived that the squared shoulders, now wounded and torn, were disabled, and that the rock was slowly sinking down.

"Porthos! Porthos!" cried Aramis, tearing his hair, "Porthos, where are you? Speak!"

"Here! here!" murmured Porthos, in a dying voice; "patience! patience!"

No sooner had he uttered these words than the momentum of the fall increased the weight; the enormous rock fell, weighed down by the two lateral rocks, which fell on top of it, and Porthos was buried in a sepulchre of broken stones.

On hearing the dying voice of his friend, Aramis had leaped on shore. Two of the Bretons followed him,—one staying behind to watch the boat,—each with a lever in his hand. The last groans of the valiant athlete guided them to the part of the ruin where he lay.

Aramis, now as animated and vigorous as a youth of twenty, sprang towards the triple mass, and, with those hands of his

that were as dainty as a woman's, raised, by a miracle of energy, a corner of the immense granite tomb. Then through the sepulchral darkness he caught a glimpse of his friend's eyes, which were shining, the lifting of the mass above him having enabled him to breathe for a moment. Immediately the two Bretons hurried up, grasped tightly their iron levers, and united their triple strength, not only to raise that mass, but to keep it raised. All their efforts were vain. The three men had to give way slowly, with cries of grief, and the rough voice of Porthos, who perceived they were exhausting themselves in a useless struggle, murmured, in a tone of banter, the last words that came to his lips with his last breath :

"Too heavy for you!"

Then the eye darkened and closed, the face grew white, the hands livid, and the Titan fell back, heaving his last sigh. With him sank the rock, which even in his agony he had upheld until now!

The three men dropped their levers, which rolled over the sepulchral stones.

Pale and breathless, his brow bathed with perspiration, Aramis listened for a sound, with an agony that was heart-breaking.

Nothing! The giant was sleeping his eternal sleep in the tomb which God had made to his measure.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

THE EPITAPH OF PORTHOS.

ARAMIS, shivering and trembling like a timorous child, arose silent and shuddering from that stone. A Christian does not walk upon graves. But though he was able to keep on his feet, he could not walk. It looked as if something of the dead Porthos had just died in him.

His Bretons surrounded him; Aramis yielded to their affectionate importunities, and the three sailors, taking him up in their arms, bore him to the canoe. Then, laying him on a bench near the rudder, they bent to their oars, preferring to row rather than hoist a sail, which might betray them.

Only a single mound now rose above the flattened shore and levelled surface of the Locmaria to attract the eye, and from that mound Aramis could not withdraw his gaze, and, away out in the offing, in proportion as he receded from land, that menacing and proud rock seemed to him to draw itself up as lately Porthos did, and to lift to heaven a form as smiling and invincible as that of his honest and valiant friend, the strongest of the four, and yet the first to die.

Singular destiny of these men of bronze ! the most guileless of human beings allied to the craftiest ; bodily strength swayed by subtlety of mind ! And at the critical moment, when vigor alone could save both mind and body, a stone, a rock, a vile material object, triumphed over strength, and, shattering the body, drove out the mind.

Honest Porthos ! born to help others, always ready to sacrifice himself for the safety of the weak, as if it was for that purpose only that God had endowed him with such strength. Simple-minded Porthos, who regarded his death as a mere fulfilment of his pact with Aramis, a pact, however, originating with Aramis alone, and which Porthos knew only in the terrible issue of the fellowship into which he had so loyally entered.

Noble Porthos ! of what avail to you your castles overflowing with sumptuous furniture, your forests overflowing with game, your lakes overflowing with fish, your cellars overflowing with wealth ? Of what avail your lackeys in their gorgeous liveries, and in the midst of them all, Mousqueton, so proud of the power which you had delegated to him ?

Oh, noble Porthos ! anxious collector of treasures, why did you labor so hard to sweeten and gild your life, and then come to a deserted shore and lay your shattered limbs under a cold stone, amid the shrieking sea-fowl ? And, finally, O noble Porthos, was it worth while to amass so much gold, and yet not have even a distich written by some wretched poet engraved on your tombstone ?

Valiant Porthos ! doubtless he sleeps there still, lost, forgotten, beneath a rock which the shepherds of the heath take for the gigantic roof of a dolmen.

And such a wealth of chilly furze and mosses caressed by the salt sea breezes and sprightly lichens has covered that sepulchre and pinioned it to the ground that never will passer-by imagine such a block of granite to have been once raised by the shoulder of a mortal.

Aramis, still pale, shivering and heart-broken, stared at the shore, until, with the last ray of daylight, it faded on the horizon. Not a word escaped his lips, not a sigh arose from the depths of his breast. The superstitious Bretons stared at him in silence. This stillness was not human, it was statue-like.

Meanwhile, as soon as the first gray shades dimmed the brightness of the sky, the boat hoisted its little sail, which, swelling out to meet the kisses of the breeze, and scudding away rapidly from the coast, headed bravely for Spain, forcing its way through that terrible Gulf of Gascony, so prolific of tempests.

However, half an hour after the running up of the sail, the sailors took a rest, and, reclining on their benches showed to one another a white point, seemingly as motionless on the horizon as is, to all appearance, a sea-gull, rocked by the insensible respiration of the billows. But that which to ordinary eyes would have seemed motionless, to the trained eyes of the sailors was moving rapidly, and that which seemed stationary on the waves was really skimming them.

For some time, witnessing the profound lethargy in which their master was sunk, they did not venture to rouse him, and were satisfied with an interchange of conjectures in a low, anxious voice. Aramis, always so vigilant and active, Aramis, whose eye, like the lynx's, was ever on the watch, and saw better by night than by day, Aramis had in fact fallen into a state of torpid and apathetic despair.

An hour passed thus, during which daylight gradually disappeared, but during which the vessel in sight gained so swiftly on the boat that Goennec, one of the fishermen, ventured to say aloud :

“ Monseigneur, we are pursued ! ”

Aramis did not answer ; the ship was still gaining. Then Yves, of his own accord, bade the two sailors lower the sail so that a point raised above the surface of the waters might not serve as a guide to their pursuing enemy.

On the other hand, the vessel in sight ran up two more small sails at the extremities of the masts and in this way accelerated its speed.

Unluckily it was the season of the finest and longest days in the year, and the moon in all her radiance followed fast on this most inauspicious day. The vessel that pursued them had,

therefore, not only half an hour of twilight, but a whole night of comparative brightness.

"Monseigneur! monseigneur! we are lost!" said the skipper. "Look, they see us, although we have reefed the sail."

"That's not strange," muttered one of the sailors; "it's said that with the devil's aid the people in cities have made things by means of which they can see as well at a great distance as they can close at hand, by night as well as by day."

Aramis took a telescope from the bottom of the boat, adjusted it silently, and handed it to the boatman:

"Look!" said he.

The boatman hesitated.

"Do not be afraid," continued the bishop; "there is no sin in doing so; and if there be I take the sin on my own shoulders."

The fisherman carried the glass to his eye and uttered an exclamation of amazement. He believed that the ship, at a cannon-shot's distance from him a moment ago, had suddenly and miraculously cleared that distance at a single bound. But on removing the glass from his eyes he perceived that the vessel was almost in the same position as before.

"So," he muttered, "they can see us just in the way we see them."

"Yes," replied Aramis, "they can;" and he sank back into his previous listlessness.

"See us!" exclaimed Yves. "Oh, that's impossible!"

"Look, skipper," said the boatman.

And he passed him the telescope.

"Monseigneur," inquired Yves, "you are sure the devil has nothing to do with all this?"

Aramis answered with a shrug of the shoulders.

The skipper then looked through the glass also.

"Oh, monseigneur, it's a miracle!" said he. "There they are, and I seem almost to be touching them. Twenty-five at the very least! And the captain on the prow! He has a glass exactly like this and is gazing at us. Ah! he turns round and gives an order; they are rolling a gun forward; they are loading it—they have aimed at us! Mercy on us! they are going to fire!"

And he removed the telescope from his eyes; then the objects he had been looking at appeared in their true relation on the horizon. The vessel was still about a league distant;

but the manœuvre which Yves had witnessed was not the less real on that account. A slight cloud of smoke could be discerned under the sails bluer than the sails themselves, and expanding like an opening flower. Then, at nearly a mile from the little canoe, a ball was seen cutting through the crests of a couple of waves, digging a white furrow in the sea, and vanishing at the end of it as inoffensive, so far, as the stone with which a child makes ducks and drakes in a pond. But it was both a menace and a warning.

"What should we do?" asked Yves.

"They will sink us," said Goennec; "give us absolution, monseigneur."

And the boatmen fell on their knees before the bishop.

"You are forgetting that they see you," said D'Herblay.

"True," answered the sailors, ashamed of their weakness.

"Give your orders, monseigneur; we are ready to die for you."

"We must stay where we are."

"What! stay here, monseigneur?"

"Yes. Did you not say a while ago that if we attempt to fly they will sink us?"

"But perhaps," urged the skipper, "as it is near nightfall, we may escape them."

"Oh," answered Aramis, "they are sure to have Greek fire, and can light up our path as well as their own."

And as if to give an answer to the suggestion of Aramis, a second cloud of smoke slowly mounted the sky, and from its bosom spurted a fiery arrow which described a parabola resembling a rainbow, and then fell into the sea, where it continued to burn, illuminating a space of a quarter of a league in diameter.

The Bretons stared at one another in dismay.

"You must now see clearly," said Aramis, "that it is better to wait for them to come up."

The boatmen at once dropped their oars, and the little craft stood still, swinging backward and forward on the crest of the waves.

Night fell, but the ship was still advancing.

Indeed, it looked as if it had gained additional speed in the darkness. From time to time, like some red-necked vulture raising its head above its nest, the terrible Greek fire darted from its sides and flung into the ocean its flame, as white as incandescent snow.

At length the vessel came within musket-range of the canoe. All of the sailors were on deck, fully armed; the gunners were at their guns, and the matches were burning. A spectator would have imagined that the crew expected to board a frigate and fight a superior force; it seemed absurd that this military strength should have been put forth for the purpose of capturing a canoe manned by four men.

"Surrender!" cried the captain through his speaking-trumpet.

The fishermen looked at Aramis.

Aramis made a sign to them with his head.

Yves immediately waved a white rag tied to a gaff.

It was his way of striking his flag.

The vessel came on like a race-horse.

It launched another rocket of Greek fire, which fell within twenty paces of the little boat and made it more conspicuous than the strongest sunlight would have done.

"At the first sign of resistance, fire!" cried the captain.

The soldiers on board levelled their muskets.

"Are n't we telling you we surrender?" shouted Yves.

"Alive! Alive, captain!" cried some of the soldiers, who had become excited; "we ought to take them alive."

"Yes, alive," answered the captain.

And turning to the Bretons he said:

"The life of every one is safe, my friends, except the Chevalier d'Herblay's."

Aramis gave a slight start that was hardly perceptible.

For an instant his eyes were riveted on the depths of the ocean, the surface of which was still illuminated by the last flashes of the Greek fire, — flashes that ran up the sides of the waves, sparkled on their crests like plumes, and rendered even more sombre, mysterious, and terrible the abysses they covered.

"You have heard, monseigneur?" asked the boatmen.

"Yes."

"What are your orders?"

"Accept."

"But what about yourself, monseigneur?"

Aramis leaned over the boat and played with the tips of his white and slender fingers on the greenish water of the sea, gazing at it as he might have gazed at the face of a friend.

"Accept," he repeated.

"We accept," cried the boatmen; "but what security shall we have?"

"The word of a gentleman. I swear by my rank and by my name that the lives of all except M. d'Herblay shall be spared. I am lieutenant of his Majesty's frigate 'La Pomone,' and my name is Louis Constant de Presigny."

Suddenly Aramis, whose body was already half out of the boat, drew himself up to his full height, and his eyes flashing, his lips smiling, said to the sailors:

"Throw down the ladder, gentlemen," in the tone of a person who alone had the right to command them.

He was obeyed.

Then Aramis seized the rope-ladder, and was the first to mount on deck. The crew, who had expected to witness an expression of terror on his countenance, were amazed to see him walk up to their commander with a firm step, look at him earnestly, and make with his hand a mysterious, incomprehensible sign, at the sight of which the officer turned pale, trembled, and bowed his head.

Without a word, Aramis raised his hand up to the eyes of the commander, and showed him the stone of a ring he wore on the ring-finger of the left hand. In doing so, he had draped himself in a cold, silent, haughty majesty, and looked like an emperor giving his hand to be kissed. The commander, who had raised his head for a moment, inclined a second time with an air of the most profound respect. Then, pointing to his cabin on the poop, he stepped aside to allow Aramis to pass before him. The three Bretons who had climbed the ladder after their bishop, stared at one another in utter stupefaction. The entire crew looked on in silence.

Five minutes later the commander summoned the second lieutenant, and ordered him to alter the vessel's course and steer for Corunna. While the order was being executed, Aramis appeared again on deck, and took a seat near the *bastingage*.

It was now the depth of night, and the moon had not yet appeared; yet Aramis kept his eyes obstinately fixed on the direction in which lay Belle-Isle. Yves then approached the captain, who had returned to his post at the stern, and in tones that were very low and humble he asked:

"What course are we following, captain?"

"We follow whatever course monseigneur pleases," was the answer.

Aramis passed the night leaning against the *bastingage*.

Yves on approaching him the next morning noticed that it must have been a very damp night, for the wood upon which the bishop's head rested was soaked with dew. Who knows! perhaps this dew consisted of the first tears that had ever fallen from the eyes of Aramis!

Worthy Porthos! could you wish a finer epitaph than that?

CHAPTER LXXIX.

M. DE GESVRES' ROUNDS.

D'ARTAGNAN was not accustomed to meet such resistance as he had just encountered. He returned to Nantes profoundly exasperated. Any sort of exasperation vented itself, in the case of this man, in an impetuous attack, which, until now, few people, whether they were kings or giants, found it possible to resist.

D'Artagnan, fairly trembling with rage, went straight to the château, and demanded an audience with the King. It was about seven in the morning, and since Louis had come to Nantes he had been an early riser. But when D'Artagnan reached the little corridor with which we are acquainted, he met M. de Gesvres, who courteously stopped him, and requested him not to speak too loud, lest he should disturb the King's repose.

"The King is asleep, is he?" said D'Artagnan. "Well, I'll let him sleep. When do you think he'll rise?"

"Oh, in two hours or so. He was up all night."

D'Artagnan put on his hat, saluted M. de Gesvres, and went to his lodgings. He returned at half-past nine. He was told that the King was at breakfast.

"That suits me exactly," said he. "I will speak to the King while he is eating."

M. de Gesvres called D'Artagnan's attention to the fact that the King did not receive any one during his repasts.

"But," replied D'Artagnan, eyeing Brienne askance, "you are not, perhaps, aware, M. le Secrétaire, that I have my *entrées* at all hours."

Brienne gently took the captain's hand, saying:

"Not at Nantes, my dear M. d'Artagnan. The King in this journey has changed all the arrangements of his household."

D'Artagnan, somewhat mollified, inquired at what hour the King was likely to finish his breakfast.

"No one knows," returned Brienne.

"No one knows? What does that mean? No one knows how long the King spends at his meals? He generally spends an hour; but as, perhaps, the air of the Loire sharpens his appetite, we'll say an hour and a half; that, I fancy, is long enough; I will wait here, then."

"Oh! my dear M. d'Artagnan, the orders are not to allow any one to stay in the corridor. I am on guard for that very purpose."

D'Artagnan felt that his brain was a second time on fire with anger. He passed out very hurriedly, afraid of rendering matters still worse by a display of temper.

When he was outside he began to reflect.

"The King," he thought, "does not wish to receive me — that is plain enough. The young man is angry; he is afraid to listen to what I might say to him. Ah! but in the meantime, Belle-Isle is besieged, and my two friends, perhaps, taken or killed. Poor Porthos! As for Master Aramis, he is full of resources, and I am not uneasy on his account. But no, no, Porthos has not yet lost his strength, nor is Aramis a dotard. The stout arms of the one and the fertile imagination of the other are likely to cut out some work for his Majesty's soldiers. What if these two heroes were to create another little Bastion Saint-Gervais for his most Christian Majesty's edification? I do not despair of it. They have cannon, and they have a garrison.

"However," D'Artagnan continued, with a shake of the head, "I fancy they would act more wisely to stop fighting. So far as I am personally concerned, I am not inclined to put up with arrogance or treachery on the part of the King; but it is my duty to endure every kind of rebuff and insult for the sake of my friends. What if I were to see Colbert? He is a man I must make afraid of me. I will go and see Colbert."

And D'Artagnan started bravely to do so.

He was informed that M. Colbert was working with the King in the château.

"Good!" cried D'Artagnan. "I am back in the days when I used to tramp from M. de Tréville's apartments to the cardinal's, from the cardinal's to the queen's, and from the queen's to Louis XIII.'s. It is a wise saying that when we grow old we become children again. Well, now for the château."

Just as he was entering, M. de Lyonne was coming out. He gave both his hands to D'Artagnan, and informed him it was the King's intention to work during the whole evening, and during the night even, and that orders were given to allow nobody to enter.

"Not even the captain who receives such orders?" cried D'Artagnan. "That is going a little too far!"

"Not even him," answered M. de Lyonne.

"Since that is the case," said D'Artagnan, stung to the quick; "since the captain of musketeers, who has always entered the King's bed-chamber even, may not now enter his dining-room or his cabinet, either the King is dead or his captain is in disfavor with him. In either case he no longer needs him. Be so kind, then, M. de Lyonne, for you are not in disfavor with him, to return and tell the King plainly that I have sent him my resignation."

"D'Artagnan, take care!" cried De Lyonne.

"Do it for old friendship's sake."

And he pushed him gently towards the cabinet.

"Well, I will go, then," said M. de Lyonne.

D'Artagnan waited, pacing up and down the corridor.

Lyonne returned.

"Well, what says the King?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"The King said: 'Very well,'" replied De Lyonne.

"He said, 'Very well,'" exclaimed D'Artagnan, excitedly. "That means he accepts, does n't it? Capital! I am free! I am a citizen, M. de Lyonne; good-bye till we meet again! Farewell, château and corridor and antechamber! A citizen, who can now breathe freely, salutes you!"

And without further delay, he ran down from the terrace to the staircase where he had found Gourville's letter. Five minutes later he was in the hostelry, where, following the custom of all the great officers having lodgings in the château, he had hired what was termed a "city apartment."

But instead of laying aside his sword and cloak, he took up his pistols, put his money in a big leather purse, sent to the

stables of the château for his horses, and gave orders to have them sent to Vannes during the night.

Everything turned out favorably. At eight he had his foot in the stirrup, when M. de Gesvres appeared at the head of twelve of his guards in front of the hostelry.

D'Artagnan was a man who saw everything at a glance; so he could not fail to see these thirteen men and their thirteen horses; but he pretended not to notice anything and quietly got on horseback. Gesvres rode up to him.

"M. d'Artagnan," said he, in a loud voice.

"Eh! — M. de Gesvres, is it? Good evening, M. de Gesvres."

"It looks as if you were getting on horseback?"

"But I am on horseback, as you can see for yourself."

"It's lucky I met you."

"You were seeking me?"

"*Mon Dieu!* yes."

"Sent by the King for me, I'd wager?"

"Yes."

"Just as, two or three days ago, I was sent for M. Fouquet?"

"Oh!"

"Come, now, you're not going to play off your airs of delicacy on me, are you? Labor lost. Why do you not tell me at once you have come to arrest me?"

"Arrest you? Gracious Heavens, no!"

"Then what do you mean by coming to visit me with a dozen troopers at your back?"

"I am making my rounds."

"Not bad, that! And you are picking me up on your rounds?"

"No, I am not picking you up. But I have met you, and I request you to come with me."

"Where?"

"To the King."

"Good!" said D'Artagnan, jeeringly. "So the King is no longer too busy to see me?"

"For pity's sake!" whispered M. de Gesvres, "do not compromise yourself; these men hear you!"

D'Artagnan answered with a laugh:

"March! People who are arrested are placed between the six last and the six first guards."

"But as I am not arresting you," said M. de Gesvres, "you will march behind me, if you have no objection."

"Well, duke, you are treating me politely, and you are right in doing so; for had I ever chanced to have been making my rounds near your city apartment, I would have dealt courteously with you, I give you my word of honor. And now, another favor. What does the King want with me?"

"Oh! the King is furious!"

"Indeed! Well, if the King has taken the trouble to get furious, I hope he'll take the trouble to get calm again. That's all there's to it. His fury won't kill me, I assure you."

"No; but —"

"It may send me to keep company with poor M. Fouquet? *Mordieux!* a true gentleman is M. Fouquet, and so we'll live together on the best of terms, and very pleasantly, too; take my word for it."

"Well, here we are," said the duke. "For God's sake, keep your temper with the King, captain."

"Ah! how very kind you are to me, duke," returned D'Artagnan, fixing his eyes on M. de Gesvres. "And yet I was told that you had an ambition to unite my musketeers to your guards; certainly you would now have a splendid opportunity for doing so!"

"God forbid I should seize it!"

"Why?"

"For several reasons, but especially for this: if I succeeded you, after arresting you —"

"Ah! you admit you are arresting me?"

"No, no!"

"Well, we'll say after meeting me. If, you were saying, you succeeded me, after meeting me?"

"Your musketeers, at their first firing-exercise, would happen, by pure mistake, to send their bullets in my direction."

"Well, I don't quite disagree with you. The rascals are certainly attached to me."

De Gesvres conducted D'Artagnan to the cabinet in which the King was waiting for his captain, and then took his place behind his colleague in the antechamber.

The King could be heard very distinctly. He was speaking in a loud voice to Colbert, in that very cabinet in which Col-

bert heard the King speaking in a loud voice to D'Artagnan some days before.

The guards remained before the principal gate as a mounted picket, and it was gradually bruited through the city that the captain of the musketeers had been arrested by order of the King.

Then might be seen the same bustle and excitement among these men that used to be so common in the times of M. de Tréville and Louis XIII. ; groups were formed here and there, staircases were crowded, vague murmurs mounted from the court-yards and rolled upward to the higher stories, sounding like the hoarse moaning of the tidal waves.

M. de Gesvres showed that he was uneasy. He looked at his guards. The musketeers had mixed among them and were asking questions. But the guards now began to be anxious also, and stood apart from them.

D'Artagnan was really less disturbed than the captain of the guards. As soon as he had entered he sat on a window-sill, seeing everything with those eagle eyes of his, but not discomposed in the least. He witnessed the progress of the excitement created by his arrest, and foresaw that there would be an explosion. We know that D'Artagnan's previsions were pretty certain to be realized.

"It would be odd," he thought, "if to-night my pretorians elected me King of France. How I should laugh!"

But at its height the excitement suddenly ceased. Guards and musketeers, officers and soldiers, murmurs and lamentations, all dispersed, vanished, died away. There were neither storms, nor threats, nor sedition any longer. A word had stilled the waves. By order of the King, Brienne had cried out: "Silence, gentlemen, you disturb his Majesty!"

D'Artagnan sighed.

"It's all over," said he; "the musketeers of to-day are not those of Louis XIII. It's all over."

"M. d'Artagnan, to the King's apartment!" cried an usher.

CHAPTER LXXX.

KING LOUIS XIV.

THE King was seated with his back turned to the entrance-door of the cabinet. In front of him was a mirror, a glance at which sufficed, while he was turning over his papers, to show him who entered. He did not move when D'Artagnan came in, but simply spread over his letters and plans the green silk cloth which served to hide his secrets from the inquisitive.

D'Artagnan saw through his game and remained a good way behind him, so that, in a minute or so, the King, who heard nothing, and saw nothing except from the corner of his eye, was forced to ask :

"Is not M. d'Artagnan here?"

"I am here," answered the musketeer, advancing.

"Well, monsieur," said Louis, with his clear eyes upon him, "what have you to say to me?"

"I, Sire?" replied the musketeer, who was watching for the first thrust of his adversary that he might answer it with a good parry; "I? I have nothing to say to your Majesty except that you have had me arrested, and here I am."

The King was about to reply that he did not have him arrested, but such a reply would look too much like an excuse, and he was silent.

D'Artagnan held his lips obstinately closed.

"Monsieur," resumed the King, "what did I order you to do at Belle-Isle? Tell me, if you please."

While uttering these words the King looked fixedly at his captain.

Here D'Artagnan was only too lucky; the King was playing into his hand so beautifully!

"I believe," he answered, "that your Majesty has done me the honor to inquire what I was to do at Belle-Isle?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Well, Sire, I really do not know; you should not put such a question to me, but to the numberless officers of all sorts to whom you gave numberless orders of all sorts, while to me, the leader of the expedition, no precise orders were given at all."

The King winced; his answer showed it.

"Monsieur," said he, "I give orders only to those I deem faithful."

"And therefore, Sire," retorted D'Artagnan, "my surprise was great to find that a captain in my position, ranking as a marshal of France, was placed under the command of five or six lieutenants or majors, good material for spies, no doubt, but not at all good for the leaders of warlike expeditions. It was on this subject I was coming to ask an explanation from your Majesty, when the door was shut in my face; it was this last outrage, inflicted upon an honest man, that induced me to abandon your Majesty's service."

"Monsieur," rejoined the King, "you still believe that you live in times when kings were in the same position you complain of having been in, under the orders and at the disposal of their inferiors. You seem to forget that a king is accountable for his acts to no one but God."

"I forget nothing, Sire," answered the musketeer, who winced in his turn at this rebuke. "Besides, I do not see how a gentleman can offend his King by asking him in what respect he has served him badly."

"You have badly served me, monsieur, by taking the part of my enemies against me."

"What enemies, Sire?"

"Those I sent you to fight against."

"Two men! enemies of your Majesty's army! It is incredible, Sire."

"It is not for you to judge of my decisions."

"But it is for me to judge of my friendships, Sire."

"He who serves his friends does not serve his master."

"That is my opinion also, Sire, and so I have respectfully offered my resignation to your Majesty."

"And I have accepted it, monsieur. But before we separate, I wish to prove to you that I know how to keep my word."

"Your Majesty has done more than keep your word; for you have had me arrested," said D'Artagnan, in his tone of cold raillery, "and you never promised me that."

The King disdained to notice the sarcasm, and observed, in his most serious manner:

"You see, monsieur, to what your disobedience has forced me."

"My disobedience?" exclaimed D'Artagnan, red with anger.

"It is the mildest term I have been able to find," continued

the King. "My resolution was to have certain rebels arrested and punished. Was I bound to inquire whether these rebels were your friends or not?"

"But I was bound to inquire," retorted D'Artagnan. "It was cruel in your Majesty to send me to capture my friends, in order that you might hang them on your gibbets."

"It was an ordeal to which I was justified in submitting those pretended servants who eat my bread and ought to defend my person. The ordeal has succeeded badly, M. d'Artagnan."

"For one bad servant that your Majesty loses," said the musketeer, bitterly, "there were ten on that very day who went through your ordeal successfully. Listen to me, Sire; I am not used to that sort of service. My sword is a rebellious one when it has to do wrong. It would have been wrong in me to hound, even to death, two men whose lives M. Fouquet, your Majesty's preserver, had asked of you. Moreover, these two men were my friends. They did not attack your Majesty; they succumbed under the pressure of a blind anger. Besides, why not let them escape? What crime had they committed? I admit that you have a right to dispute with me as to my right to judge of their conduct. But why suspect one before the fact? Why surround me with spies? Why dishonor me before the army? Why humiliate me by compelling me to witness an attack on two men by three thousand men, — me in whom you have, until now, placed entire confidence, me who, during the thirty years I have been attached to your person, have given a thousand proofs of my devotion."

"You seem to forget what these two men have done to me," said the King, in a hollow voice, "and that, had it depended on them, I was lost."

"Sire, it looks as if you had forgotten that I was there!"

"Enough, M. d'Artagnan, enough of these dominating interests that interpose between the sun and my affairs. I am founding a state in which there shall be only one master. I once made you a promise. The moment has come for the fulfilment of that promise. You wish to be free, to be able, according as your tastes and friendships prompt you, to thwart my plans and save my enemies? I must either ruin you or abandon you. Seek a more complaisant master. I know full well that another king would treat you differently; he would allow you to rule him; though, some day or other, he might send you to keep company with M. Fouquet. But I have a good memory, and with

me services are titles to gratitude, even to impunity. This is all the 'esson you will receive, M. d'Artagnan, as a punishment for your insubordination, and, as I have not imitated my predecessors in their favoritism, I will not imitate them in their resentments. And there are other reasons for my mildness in your regard. In the first place, you are a man of the soundest common sense as well as a man of great valor, and you will be a good servant to the sovereign who masters you. In the second, you will no longer have any motive for your insubordination. Your friends have been destroyed by me. The props upon which your fantastic spirit leaned, I have thrown down. At this very moment my soldiers have taken or slain the rebels of Belle-Isle."

D'Artagnan turned pale.

"Taken or slain?" he cried. "Oh! Sire, if you were thinking of what you have just said, if you were sure of telling me the truth, I should forget all that was just, all that was magnanimous in your words, and call you a savage king and a heartless man. But I pardon you these words," he added, smiling proudly, "I pardon them from the young prince who does not know and cannot understand such men as M. d'Herblay, M. du Vallon, and me. Taken or slain? Ah! Sire, tell me, if the news be true, how much treasure and how many men has this cost you. Then we may reckon if the game was worth the stakes."

While he was still speaking, the King approached him wrathfully, and said:

"M. d'Artagnan, are you aware that such questions are treasonable? Have the goodness to tell me who is King of France? Do you happen to know of another one?"

"Sire," answered the musketeer, coldly, "I remember a morning when at Vaux you put that very question to many persons who were unable to answer it, but I answered. If I recognized the King on that day, when to do so was not easy, I think it is useless to put the same question to me now, when your Majesty is alone with me."

At these words Louis cast down his eyes. It seemed to him as if the shade of the hapless Philippe had passed between D'Artagnan and him, evoking the memory of that terrible adventure.

Just at this very moment an officer entered and handed a despatch to the King, who changed color on reading it.

D'Artagnan remarked his pallor. After reading it a second time, the King remained motionless and silent. Then, suddenly coming to a resolution :

"Monsieur," said he, "you will learn the tidings I have just received later on. Better you should learn them now, and from the lips of your King. There has been a combat at Belle-Isle."

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan, calmly, although his heart was beating as if it would burst through his breast. "Well, Sire?"

"Well, monsieur, I have lost a hundred and six men."

A flash of joy and pride leaped from D'Artagnan's eyes.

"And the rebels?" he asked.

"Have fled," answered the King.

D'Artagnan uttered a cry of triumph.

"But," added the King, "I have a fleet at Belle-Isle, and I am certain no boat can escape."

"So that," said the musketeer, becoming downcast again, "if these two gentlemen are taken —"

"They will be hanged," answered the King, tranquilly.

"And they are aware of that?" said D'Artagnan, repressing a shudder.

"Yes, for you must have told them, and, in any case, the whole country about them knows it."

"Then, Sire, they will never be taken alive; I can answer for that."

"Ah!" said the King, carelessly, picking up the letter. "They will be dead all the same, and my sole object in having them taken would be to have them hanged."

D'Artagnan brushed away the perspiration that was flowing down his forehead.

"I have told you," continued Louis, "that I would, some day, be to you an affectionate, generous, and constant master. You are to-day the only man of the past that is worthy of my anger or of my friendship. I will not be sparing of either the one or the other, according to your conduct. How should you like, M. d'Artagnan, to be the servant of a king who had a hundred other kings, all his equals, in his realm? Tell me, now, could I, if I were in such a feeble condition, do the great things I am meditating? Did you ever see an artist who executed solid works with refractory tools? Monsieur, the heaven of feudal abuses belongs to the past. The Fronde, which was to destroy the monarchy, has emancipated it. I am master in my own house, Captain d'Artagnan, and I shall

have servants who, perhaps, may lack your genius, but will be heroic in their devotion and obedience. What care I if God has not endowed the legs and the arms with genius? It is to the head he gives it, and, as you know, all the other members obey the head. I am the head."

D'Artagnan started. Louis continued as if he had observed nothing, but this start had not escaped him.

"Now, monsieur, what if we were to conclude that bargain which we once made at Blois when you found me to be a very insignificant person. You ought to be thankful to me for not having made any one pay for the tears of shame I then shed. Look around you: see what great heads have bent. Bend like them, or choose the exile that may suit you better. Perhaps, on reflection, you may find out that a king who has such confidence in your loyalty that he allows you to depart, although you are discontented and possess a great state secret, has a generous heart. I know you to be an honest man. Why judge me before the evidence is before you? Judge me from this day forward, D'Artagnan, and be as severe as you like."

For the first time in his life D'Artagnan was dazed, speechless, and wavering. He had met a foeman worthy of him. This was not craft, it was penetration; this was not violence, it was strength; this was no longer anger, it was resolution; this was no longer bravado, it was self-command. This young man, who had overthrown Fouquet and could do without D'Artagnan, entirely unsettled the somewhat stubborn calculations of our musketeer.

"Well, why do you pause?" said the King, affectionately. "You have given me your resignation; do you wish me to accept it? I agree that it will be hard for my old captain to recover from his fit of ill-temper."

"Oh," answered D'Artagnan, sadly, "that is not my most serious trouble. I hesitate to take back my resignation because I am an old man, and it will be hard for me to change my habits. Henceforth you will need courtiers who know how to amuse you, madmen who are ready to fling their lives away for what you call your great works. Great those works will be, I am sure. But what if I should not find them great? I have seen war, Sire, and I have seen peace; I have served Richelieu and Mazarin; I have been scorched along with your father at La Rochelle, riddled like a sieve, have got a new

skin half a score times like a serpent. After being rebuffed and wronged I have attained to a command which had once some value, for it allowed you to say what you liked to your King. But your captain of musketeers will henceforth be an officer whose duty it is to guard the lower doors. If such, Sire, is to be my employment in the future, you ought, in good truth, now that we are on such good terms, to deprive me of it. Do not believe that I bear malice; no, you have, as you said, mastered me. But I must confess that in mastering me you have lowered me; in bending me you have shown me how feeble I am. If you only knew how pleasant it made me feel to be able to carry my head high, and what a piteous mien I shall have when my nose is smelling the dust of your carpets! Oh! Sire, I regret sincerely, and some day you, too, will regret the times when the King of France saw his halls crowded with all those lank, insolent gentlemen, ever growling and snarling, mastiffs whose bite was death on the day of battle! The best of courtiers for the hand that fed them; but oh! what teeth for the hand that smote them! But why say all this? The King is my master. He wills that I make verses; he wills that I polish with my satin shoes the mosaics of his antechambers. *Mordioux!* it will be hard, but I have done things harder. I will do it. And why? Because I love money? I have plenty. Because I am ambitious? I am at the summit of my career. Because I am fond of the court? No. I will remain because, for thirty years, I have been accustomed to receive the watchword from the King and to hear him say, with a smile, 'Good-night, D'Artagnan.' I never begged for that smile. I will beg for it now. Are you satisfied, Sire?"

And D'Artagnan slowly bent his gray head, upon which the King, smiling, proudly laid his white hand.

"Thank you, my old servant and faithful friend," said he. "Since I have no longer enemies in France I must send you to pick up your marshal's baton on a foreign battlefield. You may depend upon it I shall find you the opportunity. Meanwhile, eat of my best bread, and sleep in peace."

"Be it as you wish, Sire," answered D'Artagnan, deeply affected. "But those poor people of Belle-Isle? One of them particularly, who is so kindly and honest?"

"Do you ask me to pardon them?"

"On my knees, Sire."

"Well, carry my pardon to them, if there be still time. But do you answer for them?"

"With my life, Sire."

"Go, then. To-morrow I start for Paris. Return speedily, for I do not want you ever to leave me again."

"You need have no uneasiness on that point, Sire," cried D'Artagnan, kissing the hand of the King.

And he rushed out, his heart swelling with joy, and was soon on the road to Belle-Isle.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

M. FOUQUET'S FRIENDS.

THE King had returned to Paris. D'Artagnan, who had in twenty-four hours collected all the information possible at Belle-Isle, was soon with him. But D'Artagnan never found out the secret that was so well kept by the heavy rock of Locmaria, the heroic tomb of Porthos.

All that the captain of the musketeers could learn was that the two valiant friends whose defence he had so nobly undertaken, whose lives he had tried to save, had, with the help of three faithful Bretons, wrought marvels in the face of a whole army. He had seen the heaps of human fragments which had been hurled into the neighboring heath, staining with blood the flinty stones scattered among the broom. He had also learned that a canoe had been perceived far out at sea, and that a man-of-war had, like some bird of prey, pursued, overtaken, and devoured this poor fugitive little bird.

But there the limit of certainty ended and the field of conjecture opened. Now, what was the most natural conjecture he could form? The ship had not returned. It is true there had been a gale for the last three days; but the corvette was a good sailer and solid in her timbers; a gale would have no terrors for her, and, in D'Artagnan's opinion, she must have either gone back to Brest or entered the mouth of the Loire.

Such were the somewhat ambiguous, but, for D'Artagnan, reassuring, tidings brought by the musketeer to Louis XIV. after the King had returned with his court to Paris.

Louis, happy in his success and rendered more gentle and

affable by his present consciousness of increased power, spent a good deal of his time in riding by the carriage of La Vallière.

Everybody was eager to amuse the two queens and make them forget their desertion by a son and husband. Everybody thought only of the future; nobody troubled himself about the past. Still there were a few tender and devoted hearts in which that past lived as a painful and bleeding wound. The King was hardly installed in his palace before he received a touching proof of it.

Louis had just risen and was taking his morning repast, when his captain of musketeers presented himself before him. D'Artagnan was somewhat pale and seemed out of sorts.

The King at the first glance perceived the change in that usually unruffled face.

"Is anything the matter with you, D'Artagnan?" he inquired.

"Sire, a great misfortune has fallen on me."

"*Mon Dieu!* and what is it?"

"I have lost one of my friends; M. du Vallon was killed at Belle-Isle."

And D'Artagnan fastened his eagle eye on Louis XIV., to catch the first feeling that his features might reveal.

"I was aware of it," answered the King.

"You were aware of it and never said a word to me?" cried the musketeer.

"What was the use? Your sorrow, my friend, was worthy of all respect, and I did not wish to add to it. If I had told you of this fresh misfortune you might have thought I wanted to triumph over you. Yes, I knew that M. du Vallon was buried under the rocks of Locmaria. I knew that M. d'Herblay had seized one of my vessels and compelled it to carry him to Bayonne. But I desired you should learn of these events in a direct manner, in order to convince you that my friends are sacred in my regard; that as a man I am ready to sacrifice myself for men, though as a king I may often be forced to sacrifice men to my majesty and power."

"But, Sire, how did you know this?"

"How did you know it yourself, D'Artagnan?"

"By a letter I received from Aramis, now safe and free at Bayonne."

"Wait a moment," said the King, taking a letter from a casket on a table near a chair over which D'Artagnan was

leaning. "This letter is an exact copy of yours, and I had it from Colbert a week before you received yours. Don't you think I am pretty well served?"

"Yes, Sire," muttered D'Artagnan, "you are the only man whose fortune could control the fortune and strength of my two friends. You have used your fortune, Sire; you will not abuse it?"

"D'Artagnan," replied the King, with a kindly smile, "I might have had M. d'Herblay carried off from the territory of the King of Spain, and brought here alive to suffer for his crime. My first impulse was a very natural one, but I will not yield to it. He is free and will remain free."

"Oh! Sire, but will you always be so clement, so noble, and generous as you have shown yourself in regard to M. d'Herblay? You will find many counsellors around you who will cure you of that weakness."

"No, D'Artagnan, you are mistaken if you think my advisers have urged me to adopt rigorous measures. It was Colbert who advised me to spare M. d'Herblay."

"Sire!" exclaimed D'Artagnan, in amazement.

"And now to come to yourself," continued the King, with an amiability that was unusual in him. "I have several pieces of good news to announce to you; you will hear them after I have looked over my reports, my dear captain. I told you that I wished to make, and would make, your fortune. Well, my promise is about to be realized."

"A thousand thanks, Sire. I can wait, though. But while I am waiting and practising patience, would your Majesty deign to cast your eyes on the poor people who have been besieging your antechamber for a long time, and are here for the purpose of humbly laying their petition at your feet?"

"Who are they?"

"Enemies of your Majesty."

The King raised his head.

"Friends of M. Fouquet," added D'Artagnan.

"Their names?"

"M. Gourville, M. Péliisson, and a poet, M. Jean de la Fontaine."

The King paused a moment and reflected.

"What do they want?"

"I do not know."

"What do they look like?"

"They are in mourning."

"What do they say?"

"Nothing."

"What are they doing?"

"Weeping."

"Let them enter," said the King, knitting his brows.

D'Artagnan turned round quickly, lifted the tapestry at the entrance to the royal chamber, and directing his voice to the next room, cried:

"Enter!"

The three men mentioned by D'Artagnan immediately advanced to the door of the cabinet, at which the King and the musketeer were standing.

On their way a profound silence encountered them. The courtiers, at the approach of the unhappy superintendent's friends, shrank back, as if they might be plague-stricken by coming in contact with disgrace and misfortune.

But D'Artagnan stepped forward quickly and greeted these downcast men, shaking each of them by the hand. Then he led them to the recess of the window whither the King had retired to seat himself. Though he had consented to receive them, he was determined that their reception should be a stern one.

The first of Fouquet's friends to advance was Péliisson. He no longer wept; he had checked his tears that the King might the better hear his voice and prayer.

Gourville bit his lips to keep back the sobs, out of respect for the King. La Fontaine buried his head in his handkerchief. The only sign of life he gave was the convulsive heaving of his shoulders arising from his internal agony.

The King preserved all his dignity. His countenance was impassive. His forehead was even still wrinkled by the frown that had come there when D'Artagnan announced his enemies. He made a gesture which signified, "Speak," and stood up, eyeing these despairing men with a deep and searching gaze.

Péliisson bowed down to the very ground, and La Fontaine knelt as if he were in a church.

This obstinate silence, only broken by sighs and groans, at length began to move the King, but with impatience, not with compassion.

"M. Péliisson," said he, curtly and dryly, "M. Gourville, and you, M. —"

And he did not name La Fontaine.

"It would occasion me grave displeasure if you came to plead for one of the greatest criminals it has ever been the function of my justice to punish. A king can be affected only by tears or by remorse; the tears of the innocent, the remorse of the guilty. I do not wish to believe either in the remorse of M. Fouquet or in the tears of his friends, because M. Fouquet is corrupt to the very marrow, and his friends must dread coming to offend me in my very palace. Therefore I must request you, M. Gourville, M. Péliisson, and you, M. —, to say nothing inconsistent with the profound respect you should have for my will."

"Sire," replied Péliisson, trembling at these terrible words, "we have not come to say aught to your Majesty that is not the expression of the deep and sincere respect and love which all your subjects owe to their King. The justice of your Majesty is redoubtable; all must bend beneath its decrees. We bow respectfully before it. Far from us the thought of coming to defend him who has had the misfortune to offend your Majesty. He who has incurred your displeasure may be our friend, but he is an enemy of the State. We abandon him, though with tears, to the severity of the King."

"Moreover," interrupted the King, mollified by this suppliant voice and these persuasive words, "my parliament will determine the affair. I do not strike before I have weighed the crime. If my justice carries the sword, it also carries the scales."

"We have every confidence in the impartiality of our King, and we hope, when the hour for the defence of an accused friend has struck for us, to make our feeble voices heard, with your Majesty's permission."

"But, gentlemen, what do you want now?" said the King, in his most imposing manner.

"Sire," answered Péliisson, "the prisoner has left a wife and a family. The little property he had left hardly sufficed to pay his debts, and Madame Fouquet, since her husband's captivity, has been abandoned by everybody. The hand of your Majesty smites like the hand of God. When the Lord sends the scourge of leprosy or the plague to a family, every one flees the abode of the leper or the plague-stricken. Sometimes, but very rarely, a generous physician dares to approach the accursed threshold, crosses it fearlessly, and exposes his life

in the combat with death. He is the last resource of the dying victim; he is the instrument of heavenly pity. Sire, we beseech you, with clasped hands and on bended knees, as we beseech our Maker! Madame Fouquet has no longer any friends, no longer any support. She weeps alone in her home, poor and deserted, abandoned by those who thronged to her doors in other days. She has neither credit nor hope left! The wretch upon whom your anger falls at least receives from you, guilty though he be, the daily bread which he moistens with his tears. But Madame Fouquet, quite as afflicted as her husband and even more destitute, Madame Fouquet, who had the honor to receive your Majesty at her table, Madame Fouquet, the spouse of your late superintendent of finance, Madame Fouquet has no longer bread!"

Here the deathlike silence which had hitherto held in the breath of Péliisson's two friends was broken by an outburst of sobs, and D'Artagnan, whose heart was stirred to its very depths by this humble prayer, turned on his heels and went into a corner, where he could bite his mustache and repress his sighs at his ease.

The eyes of the King, however, were dry and his countenance still severe, but the blood surged to his cheeks and his confidence in his own firmness was diminishing visibly.

"What is it you wish?" he said, in a tone of some emotion.

"We have come humbly to entreat your Majesty," replied Péliisson, whose feelings were beginning to get the better of him, "to permit us, without incurring your displeasure, to lend Madame Fouquet two thousand pistoles, collected among the former friends of her husband, in order that the widow may not lack the necessaries of life."

At the word "widow," uttered by Péliisson, although Fouquet still lived, the King turned very pale; his pride fell; pity sprang from his heart and mounted to his lips. He gazed compassionately on all those people who were sobbing at his feet.

"God forbid," he answered, "that I should confound the innocent with the guilty. They know me ill who doubt my mercy towards the weak. I strike none but the arrogant. Do all your hearts counsel you to do, gentlemen, for the relief of Madame Fouquet. And now, gentlemen, go."

The three gentlemen rose, silent, tearless, for their tears had been dried up by the burning contact of their cheeks and eyelids.

They had not even strength enough to thank the King, who, for that matter, soon cut short their formal reverences by entrencing himself suddenly behind his armchair.

D'Artagnan remained alone with the King.

"Well done!" said he, approaching the young monarch, who questioned him by a look; "well done, my master! If you had not the motto which forms the device of your sun, I should advise you to have M. Conrart translate this one into Latin: 'Gentle to the weak, harsh to the strong!'"

The King smiled, and passed into the next hall, after saying to D'Artagnan:

"I give you the leave of absence you must need to settle the affairs of the late M. du Vallon, your friend."

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE WILL OF PORTHOS.

PIERREFONDS was plunged in mourning. The courts were deserted, the stables closed, the gardens neglected. In the basins the fountains, lately so dazzling and noisy, stopped of themselves. On the roads that led to the château grave-looking personages might be seen ambling along on mules and nags. They were country neighbors, the priests and bailiffs of the adjacent estates. Everybody entered the château silently, surrendered his mount to a dismal groom, and, guided by a chasseur clad in black, directed his steps to the grand hall, where Mousqueton received him on the threshold.

Mousqueton had grown so thin during the last two days that his clothes rattled about him like those excessively broad scabbards in which the sword-blades dance at every movement.

His face, mottled with red and white, like that of Van Dyck's Madonna, was furrowed by two silvery streamlets, which dug their beds in those cheeks once so full, now so flabby. Mousqueton found new tears for each new visitor, and it was pitiable to see him clasp his throat with his big hand in order to strangle the sobs that were coming.

The object of all these visits was to hear the reading of the

will of Porthos, which had been announced for to-day, and at which his friends, as well as those who hankered after his belongings (for he had no relatives), wished to be present. The visitors took their places as they arrived, and the grand hall had just been closed, for twelve o'clock was striking, the hour appointed for the reading.

The notary of Porthos — Maître Coquenard's successor, naturally — slowly unfolded the vast parchment upon which the puissant hand of the lord of Pierrefonds had traced his last wishes. The seals having been broken, the indispensable spectacles having been put on, the preliminary cough having resounded, every one strained his ears. Mousqueton, however, had squatted in a corner that he might weep more and hear less.

But suddenly the two folding-doors that had been lately closed opened as it were through some miraculous agency, and a manly face was seen on the threshold, shining resplendent in the sunlight. It was D'Artagnan, who had come alone to the door, and, since he had not found any one to hold his stirrup, he had tied his steed to the knocker and announced himself. The full light of day, which now invaded the grand hall, the murmur of those present, but more than all, the instinct of the faithful dog, aroused Mousqueton from his torpor. He raised his head, recognized his master's old friend, and howling with grief, ran to embrace his knees, while watering the floor with his tears.

D'Artagnan raised the poor steward, embraced him as a brother, and after graciously saluting the assembly, who all bowed, while whispering to one another his name, he sat down at the end of the carved oaken hall, still holding the hand of Mousqueton, who was choking, and had crouched beside him on a footstool.

Thereupon the notary, who was quite as affected as every one else, began the reading.

Porthos, after one of the most Christian professions of faith possible, asked pardon of his enemies for all the injuries he might have done them.

At this paragraph a flash of ineffable pride shone in D'Artagnan's eyes. He was recalling the old soldier's deeds. He reckoned up all the enemies of Porthos overthrown by his valiant hand, and he said to himself that Porthos had acted wisely in not entering into particulars either as to the number of his

enemies or their injuries. If he had done so the reader's task would have been too onerous.

Then came the following enumeration :

"I possess at the present hour, by the grace of God :

"1. The domain of Pierrefonds, lands, woods, meadows, waters, forests, surrounded by good walls.

"2. The domain of Bracieux, château, forests, plough-lands, forming three farms.

"3. The little estate of Vallon, so called because it is in a valley."

Honest Porthos !

"4. Fifty farms in Touraine, containing about seven hundred acres.

"5. Three mills on the Cher, each of which brings in six hundred livres.

"6. Three ponds in Berri, returning two hundred livres a year.

"As to my *movable* property, so called because it can be moved, as my learned friend the Bishop of Vannes has so clearly explained to me —"

D'Artagnan shuddered at the dismal memories called up by that name.

The notary went on imperturbably :

"It consists :

"1. Of valuables I cannot enumerate here for want of space, being the furniture of all my châteaux or houses, but of which a list has been drawn up by my intendant."

Every eye was turned to Mousqueton at this point, but Mousqueton was absorbed in his grief.

"2. Of twenty riding and draught horses, most of which are at my château of Pierrefonds, and are called : Bayard, Roland, Charlemagne, Pépin, Dunois, La Hire, Ogier, Samson, Milon, Nemrod, Urgande, Armide, Falstrade, Dalila, Rebecca, Yolande, Finette, Grisette, Lisette, and Musette.

"3. Of sixty dogs, forming six packs, divided as follows : the first for the stag ; the second for the wolf ; the third for the boar ; the fourth for the hare ; and the two last for pointing or watching.

"4. Of military and hunting arms arranged in my armory.

"5. Of my wines of Anjou, selected for Athos, who was once partial to them ; of my wines of Champagne, Burgundy,

and Spain, filling eight cellars and twelve vaults in my different mansions.

"6. Of my pictures and statues, which are said to be of great value, and which are numerous enough to tire one's eyes.

"7. Of my library, composed of six thousand volumes, all new, and which never have been opened.

"8. Of my plate, a little worn, perhaps, but which ought to weigh from ten to twelve hundred pounds, for I had great trouble in lifting the chest containing it, and could carry it round my chamber only six times.

"9. Of all other objects, besides table and house linen, scattered through such of my residences as I liked best."

Here the reader stopped for breath. Every one sighed, coughed, and redoubled his attention.

"I have never had children, and probably never shall have any, which is a poignant grief to me. I have made a mistake, however; for, in common with my other friends, I have a son: M. Raoul Auguste Jules de Bragelonne, the real son of M. le Comte de la Fère."

Here a sharp sound rang out. It was caused by D'Artagnan's sword, which had slipped from his baldrick and fallen to the floor. Every one turned his eyes in the direction of the sound, and saw a big tear roll from the thick eyelashes of the musketeer down on his aquiline nose, whose luminous bridge shone like a crescent inflamed by the sun.

"Wherefore," continued the notary, "I bequeath all my properties, movable and immovable, comprised in the enumeration herein made, to M. le Vicomte Raoul Auguste Jules de Bragelonne, son of M. le Comte de la Fère, to console him for the sorrow which apparently afflicts him, and to enable him to bear his name gloriously."

A long murmur ran through the auditory.

The notary continued, sustained by the flaming eye of D'Artagnan, which made a tour of the assembly and speedily restored order.

"On condition that M. le Vicomte de Bragelonne give to M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, captain of the King's musketeers, whatever portion of my property the said Chevalier d'Artagnan may demand.

"On condition that M. le Vicomte de Bragelonne give an

adequate pension to my friend, M. d'Herblay, should he be forced to live in exile.

"On condition that M. le Vicomte de Bragelonne support all my servants who have lived ten years with me, and give five hundred livres to each of the others.

"I leave to my intendant Mousqueton all my city, military, and hunting costumes, being in number forty-seven, feeling assured that he will wear them as long as they last for love and in memory of me.

"Moreover, I bequeath to M. le Vicomte de Bragelonne my old and faithful servant and friend, Mousqueton, already named, on condition that the said M. le Vicomte de Bragelonne shall so act that the said Mousqueton shall declare at his death that he has never ceased to be happy."

When Mousqueton heard these words, he bowed, pale and trembling. His broad shoulders shook convulsively; his icy hands dropped from his face, which bore the impress of the most awful grief, and the spectators saw him stumble, then hesitate, as if he wished to quit the hall, but was at a loss in what direction to go.

"Mousqueton, my dear friend," said D'Artagnan, "go and get ready. You must come with me to the château of Athos, where I am going as soon as I leave Pierrefonds."

Mousqueton made no answer. He hardly breathed. And as if everything in that hall was to be a stranger to him henceforth, he opened the door and slowly disappeared.

The notary then finished his reading, after which vanished most of those who had come to hear the last wishes of Porthos. They had been deceived in their expectations, but they were full of respect for the great seigneur.

As for D'Artagnan, who was alone after the notary had taken a ceremonious leave of him, he admired the profound sagacity of the testator. Porthos had distributed his property among the most worthy or the most needy with a delicacy which the most refined courtier or the most generous heart could not rival.

Thus he had enjoined Raoul de Bragelonne to give to D'Artagnan all that D'Artagnan might ask, knowing full well, the honest giant, that D'Artagnan would ask nothing.

Porthos bequeathed a pension to Aramis, who, if he were tempted to ask too much, would be stopped by the example of D'Artagnan; and the very word "exile" thrown in by the testator without apparent intention — was it not the gentlest, the

most exquisite criticism on the conduct that had led to the death of Porthos?

Finally, no allusion was made in the will to Athos. In fact, was not Porthos perfectly convinced that the son would consider his inheritance as belonging to the father? His untutored mind had a truer appreciation of all these influences and of all these shades than either law or usage or even taste could ever have.

"Porthos was all heart," said D'Artagnan to himself, with a sigh.

But he fancied he heard a groan from the ceiling. He at once thought of poor Mousqueton, and that he must do something to divert him from his grief. As the worthy intendant did not return, he left the hall hastily in search of him. He ran up the stairs leading to the first story, and saw in the bedroom of Porthos a heap of clothing of every sort, and Mousqueton lying stretched on top of it.

It was the legacy bequeathed to the faithful friend. These clothes were truly his, it was well that they should have been left to him. The hand of Mousqueton was extended over these relics, which he was, as it were, kissing with his lips, his face, nay, with his whole body.

D'Artagnan approached the poor fellow with the view of consoling him.

"Good God!" he cried, "he does not stir; he must have fainted!"

But D'Artagnan was deceived; Mousqueton was dead — dead, like the dog who had lost his master and returned to die on that master's cloak.

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

THE OLD AGE OF ATHOS.

WHILE these events were separating forever the four musketeers, once united by ties that appeared indissoluble, Athos, left alone after Raoul's departure, was beginning to pay his tribute to that anticipated death which is called the absence of those we love.

After his return to Blois to a house which no longer held even Grimaud, to receive a piteous smile from him as he walked in his gardens, Athos felt that that robust constitution of his, once apparently invincible, was growing daily weaker and weaker.

Old age, for a long time kept at a distance by contact with the beloved object, now arrived with its attendant train of pains and annoyances, which always advance in increased numbers if they have been compelled to wait. The presence of his son no longer forced him to be on his guard, to walk straight, to hold his head high, so as to afford a good example ; he had no longer before him the shining eyes of youth, those burning focuses in which the light of his own had been revived.

And then, it must be confessed, exquisite as was his nature in its tenderness and reserve, now that nothing restrained its impulses, it surrendered to sorrow with the passion displayed by vulgar natures when they surrender to joy.

The Comte de la Fère, who had been young at sixty-two, the warrior who had preserved his strength in spite of every sort of fatigue, his freshness of mind in spite of every sort of misfortune, his mental and bodily serenity in spite of Milady, Mazarin, and La Vallière, had grown old in a week from the moment he had lost the stay of his sexagenarian youthfulness.

Still handsome, though bent ; noble-looking still, though tottering meekly and sadly under his gray hairs, he was becoming accustomed, in his loneliness, to seek the glades where the rays of the sun hardly penetrated through the foliage.

He lost all taste for the violent exercises that had formed an essential part of his whole life, when Raoul was no longer with him. The servants, who had seen him rise with the dawn at all seasons, were astonished when it struck seven in summer, and yet their master was not up.

Athos stayed in bed with a book under his pillow ; but he neither slept nor read. He remained in bed that he might no longer have to carry his body, and that he might be able to free his soul from its vesture and let it return to his son or to God.

Sometimes he would remain for hours in such dumb, apathetic torpor that those who saw him then were absolutely dismayed ; he no longer heard the footsteps of his valet when he came timidly to the threshold of his bedroom door to discover

whether his master was sleeping or waking. He often forgot that half the day had slipped by and that the hours for the first two meals had passed. On such occasions a servant awoke him; then he arose and descended to his favorite sombre avenue, now and then emerging into the sunlight as if to share for a moment its warmth with his absent child; and afterward, the same dismal, monotonous promenade began anew, until he was tired out, when he returned to his chamber and lay down again.

For several days the count did not utter a word. He declined receiving visitors, and during the night he was seen to light the lamp and spend long hours writing or poring over parchments.

Athos wrote one of his letters to Vannes, another to Fontainebleau; they remained without answer. We know the reason: Aramis had quitted France; D'Artagnan was travelling from Nantes to Paris, from Paris to Pierrefonds. His valet noticed that he shortened his walk every day by several turns. The avenue of lindens soon became too long for feet that once paced it a thousand times in a single day; the count would go as far as the central trees, sit down on a mossy bank that formed one of the cuttings of a side path, and there wait for the return of his strength, or, rather, for the return of night.

Soon a hundred yards exhausted him. At last he refused to rise at all; then he declined all nourishment, and his terrified servants, although he did not complain, although he always wore a smile on his lips and spoke in his usual soft tones, went to Blois for the physician who had attended his father, and brought him into the count's presence, but taking care that he should see and not be seen.

They placed the doctor in a closet opening on the sick man's chamber, and begged him not to show himself, since their master had not asked for a physician.

The doctor obeyed. Athos was regarded by the gentlemen of the place as their model. The Blaisois province was proud of possessing this consecrated relic of the old glories of France; and indeed in comparison with the nobles that the King improvised by touching with his young and fecund sceptre the withered trunks of provincial heraldic trees, Athos was a magnificent specimen of the *grand seigneur*.

And Athos was loved as well as revered. It went to the

physician's heart to see the tears of his dependents and witness the despair of the poor people of the parish, who owed their means of existence to the benevolence of Athos. He examined, then, from his hiding-place, the symptoms of the mysterious disease which was daily crippling and undermining a man lately so full of life and so desirous of living.

He noticed on the cheeks of Athos the purple of fever, which is lit and fed by its own substance, slow, pitiless fever, born in some recess of the heart and sheltering itself behind that rampart, owing its growth to the very suffering it engenders, both cause and effect of a perilous situation.

At length the count spoke to no one, not even to himself when alone. His self-communing was of a kind that dreaded noise; it sometimes reached a degree of exaltation that bordered on ecstasy. Man is only thus self-centred when, though he does not yet belong to God, he no longer belongs to earth.

The doctor spent several hours in studying this painful struggle of the will with a superior power. To see those eyes always fixedly set, always directed towards an invisible object, appalled him; to see that heart, from which a sigh never arose to vary its action, always beating with the same movement, appalled him. Sometimes the change in the acuteness of the pain creates the hope of the physician.

Half a day passed thus. Then the doctor, like a courageous man, formed his resolution. He issued abruptly from his retreat and came straight up to Athos, who showed as little surprise as if there had been nothing strange in his sudden appearance.

"Pardon me, M. le Comte," said the physician, approaching him with open arms, "but I have an accusation to bring against you, and you must hear it."

And he sat down by the pillow of Athos, who roused himself from his preoccupation only with the greatest difficulty.

"What is the matter, doctor?" he inquired, after a pause.

"The matter is that you are ill, monsieur, and have had no physician."

"Ill? I ill?" said Athos, smiling.

"Fever, consumption, weakness, debility, M. le Comte."

"Weakness!" replied the count. "How can that be? I do not get up."

"Come, come, now, M. le Comte, no subterfuges! You are a good Christian?"

"I think so," answered Athos.

"You would not kill yourself, would you?"

"Never, doctor."

"Well, monsieur, you are killing yourself. To remain as you are is suicide. Get cured, M. le Comte, get cured!"

"Cured of what? First find the disease. I have never felt better, the heavens have never seemed to me more beautiful, the flowers never more worthy of my love."

"You have a hidden sorrow."

"Hidden? No, doctor. The only sorrow I have springs from my son's absence, and I do not hide it."

"M. le Comte, your son lives, is well, is sure of enjoying that renown which is the birthright of his race and is due to his merit. Live for his sake."

"But I do live, doctor. Oh, do not feel uneasy," he added, smiling sadly, "it is easy to know that Raoul is alive, for as long as he lives I shall live."

"What is this you are saying?"

"Something very simple. At present, doctor, my life is in a state of suspense. Now that Raoul is no longer with me a forgetful, careless, indifferent life would overtax my strength. You do not ask the lamp to burn when no spark has lit the flame. Do not ask me to live in the midst of noise and brightness. I am simply vegetating, making my preparations, waiting. Stay, doctor, — do you remember the soldiers we used to see so often at the ports where they were waiting to embark? They lay around, indifferent, half on one element, half on the other; they were neither where the sea was about to carry them, nor where the land was about to lose them; but their baggage was ready, their eyes were fixed on the goal, their minds were on the stretch — they were waiting. Now, those words paint my present life to perfection. Lying down like the soldiers, with ear strained for whatever reports may reach me, I wish to be ready to set out at the first summons. Who will send me that summons? Life or death? God or Raoul? My baggage is ready, my soul is prepared, I am waiting for the signal — waiting, doctor, waiting!"

The doctor knew the temper of that mind, he appreciated its firmness. After a moment's reflection he told himself that words were vain, remedies absurd, and he took his departure, exhorting the servants not to leave their master alone for an instant.

When the doctor had retired, Athos did not exhibit either anger or annoyance at having been disturbed; he did not even order his letters to be brought to him promptly. He was well aware that any relief his servants could procure for him would be a pleasure they would have purchased with their blood.

A time came when Athos hardly ever slept. By intense thinking he became oblivious to everything for a few hours, fell into a state of reverie more dark and deep than that which others would have called a dream. This momentary repose gave a certain degree of invigoration to the body, which the soul wearied. Athos had a double life during these wanderings of his understanding. One night he dreamed that Raoul was dressing in his tent, preparatory to going on an expedition which M. de Beaufort was to conduct personally. The young man was sad, and was slowly fitting on his cuirass and buckling on his sword.

"What ails you?" his father asked, tenderly.

"The cause of my grief is the death of Porthos, our dear, dear friend," answered Raoul. "I suffer here the same pain that you will feel at home."

And the vision passed away with his slumbers.

At daybreak a servant entered, and handed the count a letter that came from Spain.

"The writing of Aramis," he thought; and he read it.

"Porthos dead!" he cried, after the first lines. "Raoul, Raoul, thanks! thou hast kept thy promise, thou hast warned me!"

And, overcome by a deadly sweat, Athos fainted, from no other cause than his weakness.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

THE VISION OF ATHOS.

WHEN the fainting-fit was over, the count, almost ashamed of allowing this supernatural event to conquer him, dressed and ordered a horse to be saddled. He had decided to go to Blois and obtain news that he could rely on, either from Africa, or from Aramis, or D'Artagnan.

The letter of Aramis was, however, full of information on the ill-success of the Belle-Isle expedition, and the particulars it gave of the death of Porthos were numerous enough to move the tender and devoted heart of Athos to its very depths.

He was resolved, then, to pay his friend Porthos a last visit. He also intended to inform D'Artagnan of his wish to render this honor to his old comrade, and to induce him to make a second arduous journey to Belle-Isle in his company. After this melancholy pilgrimage to the tomb of the giant, whom he had loved so much, he would return home, in obedience to that secret influence which was conducting him to eternity by these mysterious paths.

But no sooner had his servants, in a fever of joyous excitement, dressed their master; no sooner had they seen him get ready for a journey they hoped would banish his melancholy; no sooner was the count's best-tempered steed saddled and brought to the door, than he felt his head growing dizzy, his limbs growing feeble; and he knew that it was impossible for him to advance a step further.

He asked to be helped out into the sunlight. He was gently laid on his favorite bank of moss, where he passed a full hour before he could recover his senses thoroughly.

Nothing was more natural than this debility after the inert repose of the last days. He was persuaded to drink a cup of soup, as it was sure to revive him, and he steeped his parched lips in a glass of the wine he liked best, that old wine of Anjou mentioned by the good Porthos in his admirable testament.

Then, with his body comforted and his mind free, he had his horse brought to him again; but he was unable to mount without the aid of his servants, and even then only with great difficulty. He did not go a hundred yards; a shivering seized him again at the turning of the road.

"This is strange," said he to his valet, who accompanied him.

"For God's sake, monseigneur, let us stop!" replied the faithful servant. "You are very pale."

"That will not hinder me from continuing my journey, now that I am on the road," replied the count.

And he gave his horse his head.

But suddenly the animal, instead of obeying his master,

halted. A movement of which Athos was unconscious had checked the bit.

"Something," said he, "wills that I should go no farther. Help me," he added, holding out his arms. "Quick, come here. Every muscle in my body is relaxed, and I am going to fall."

The valet had seen the movement made by his master before he had heard his order. He was beside him in a moment, and received him in his arms. The other servants were still at the door watching the count's departure, and he was not too far away for them not to notice that something was wrong, especially as his ordinary gait was so steady and uniform. The valet summoned his comrades to his aid with voice and gesture, and all came running up to him immediately.

However, as soon as Athos had taken a few steps in the direction of the house he began to feel better. His vigor seemed renewed, and the desire of going to Blois returned. He wheeled his horse round in that direction, but when he had done so he sank back into his former state of torpor and anguish.

"Decidedly," he murmured, "IT IS WILLED that I shall remain at home."

His servants helped him off his horse, and carried him into the house. His chamber was soon got ready, and he was put to bed.

"Be sure to remember," said he, disposing himself to sleep, "that I expect letters from Africa to-day."

"You will doubtless be glad to hear, monseigneur, that the son of Blaisois has gone away on horseback, so as to gain an hour over the Blois courier," said his valet.

"Thanks," replied Athos, with his kindly smile.

The count went to sleep; but it was a sleep so troubled that it resembled pain. The servant who watched at his bedside saw on his face several times an expression that denoted great internal suffering.

The day passed away; young Blaisois returned; the courier had not brought any tidings. Athos counted every minute despairingly, and shuddered when the minutes made up an hour. The idea that his son had forgotten him came to him once, and the pang it cost him was terrible.

No one now expected the courier to arrive, for his hour was long since past. An express had travelled to Blois four times, but there were no letters for the count.

Athos knew that this courier arrived only once a week. A week, therefore, of killing anxiety was before him.

And with this painful conviction his night began.

During the first hour of this night of anguish Athos piled up all the dismal conjectures which a sick man, irritated by his sufferings, can add to probabilities that are already gloomy enough.

The fever mounted until it invaded his chest, where the fire soon caught, to use the expression of the physician brought back with him from Blois by young Blaisois, after his last expedition thither. It soon reached the head. The doctor bled him twice, and this dislodged the fever, but left the patient so feeble that he had no power of action anywhere except in the brain.

However, this dangerous fever had been got rid of. It had made its last assault on his benumbed extremities, and retreated when midnight struck. The doctor, seeing that there was a marked improvement, returned to Blois, after ordering certain prescriptions. He declared the patient was saved.

After this the situation of Athos became strange and indefinable. Now that he was able to think, his mind turned towards Raoul, that beloved son. His imagination showed him the district of Africa in the neighborhood of Djidgelli, where Beaufort had landed with his army. It was covered with gray rocks, made green in some spots by the action of the waters of the sea, when it lashes the shore in storms and hurricanes. Beyond the shore, variegated by these tomb-like rocks, rose in the form of an amphitheatre, among mastic-trees and cactus, a sort of hamlet, now filled with smoke, uproar, confusion, and terror.

Suddenly from the bosom of the smoke sprang up a flame which crept along this hamlet, covering its whole surface, spreading wider every moment until it had embraced in its red and whirling folds, tears, lamentations, arms raised appealingly to heaven. During an instant there was an inextricable jumble of crumbling madriers, broken swords, calcined stones, and burning trees.

Strange to say, in this chaos where Athos could distinguish arms uplifted, and cries, and sobs, and sighs, he never saw a human face.

Cannon thundered in the distance, musketry flashed, the sea

roared, the flocks escaped, bounding down the verdant slopes. But there was no soldier to apply the lighted match to the cannon, no sailor to aid in the manœuvring of the fleet, no shepherd to guard these flocks.

After the ruin of the village and the destruction of the forts that rose above it, — a ruin and destruction wrought as it were by magic, without the coöperation of a single human being, — the flames died away, the smoke began to ascend, then diminished in intensity, paled, and evaporated completely.

After this, night covered the landscape, a night of darkness on the earth, a night of brilliancy in the firmament; the large, blazing stars of an African sky were shining, but they illuminated only themselves.

A protracted silence ensued which rested for a time the troubled imagination of Athos, and as he felt that he had not yet seen all he had to see, he fixed the eyes of his understanding more intently than ever upon the strange spectacle brought before him by his imagination.

The continuation of this spectacle followed quickly. A mild, pallid moon rose behind the declivities of the coast, and first silvering the undulating ripples of the sea, which had seemingly grown calm after the roarings it had sent forth during the first part of the vision of Athos, it hung its diamonds upon the briars and bushes of the hills.

The gray rocks, like silent listening phantoms, raised their greenish heads to inspect the field of battle by the light of the moon, and Athos perceived that this field, entirely vacant during the combat, was now strewn with dead bodies.

An inexplicable shiver of fear and horror seized his soul when he recognized the white and blue of the Picardy regiment, their long blue-handled pikes, and their muskets marked on the butts with the fleur-de-lis.

When he saw all these cold and gaping wounds staring at the azure sky, as if demanding back the souls to which they had given passage; when he saw the stiff and disembowelled horses, their tongues hanging out at one side of their mouths, lying in the bloody pools around them; when he saw Beaufort's white charger stretched, with shattered head, in the first row of corpses, — Athos passed his icy hand over his forehead, surprised that it was not on fire. He was convinced by this touch that he was present, as a spectator, free from all fever, on the morrow following a battle fought on the coast

of Djidgelli by the army of the expedition, that army which he had seen leaving the coast of France and vanishing beyond the horizon, that army which he had saluted when the last cannon-shot was fired as the duke's farewell to his native land.

Who is able to depict the deadly ravages of his soul when it followed, like a watchful eye, the lines of corpses, inspecting them one by one, to discover whether Raoul's might not be amongst them? Who could express the divine, the intoxicating joy with which Athos bowed before God and thanked him because he had not found what he sought among the dead with such apprehension?

And all these stiffened, ice-cold bodies, easy to be recognized, seemed to turn willingly and respectfully towards the Comte de la Fère, that he might the better see them during this gruesome examination.

Yet he was astonished that, perceiving the dead, he could see no sign of the living.

To such a degree of illusion had he arrived that his vision was a real voyage made to Africa by the father in search of authentic information about the son.

And so, fatigued after his journey across seas and continents, he sought repose under one of the tents sheltered behind a rock, and over which floated the white pennon of France studded with fleurs-de-lis. He looked around for a soldier who would guide him to the tent of M. de Beaufort.

Then, while his eyes were wandering over the plain, a white form started up before him behind the resinous myrtles.

This form was clad in an officer's costume; it held in its hand a broken sword; it advanced slowly towards Athos, who suddenly paused and fixed his gaze upon it, and, without speaking or moving, tried to hold out his arms, because in that pale, silent officer he had just recognized Raoul.

He endeavored to utter a cry; but it was stifled in his throat. With a gesture Raoul motioned him to be still, laying a finger on his lips, and retiring slowly, although Athos did not see his lips move.

The count, paler than Raoul, followed, with trembling limbs, over bushes and briars, rocks and ditches. Raoul did not seem to touch the earth, and no obstacle impeded the swiftness of his gait.

The count, exhausted by the rough inequalities of the soil,

was soon compelled to halt; but Raoul continued to beckon him on. Then the tender father, whose strength love renewed, made a last effort and climbed the mountain in the steps of the young man, who drew him after him by his gestures and his smiles.

At last he touched the crest of the hill, and saw, outlined in black, the aerial form of his son. Athos stretched out his hand, thinking to reach the beloved object, and Raoul also held out his to his father. But suddenly, as if forced away in spite of himself, the young man quitted the earth, and Athos saw the sky shining between the feet of his child and the hill upon which he stood.

Raoul ascended insensibly into the void, still smiling, still summoning him by his gestures, but still withdrawing farther from his gaze towards the heavens.

Athos uttered a cry of alarmed affection; then he looked downward. He beheld a ruined camp and all the white corpses of the royal army, scattered here and there like motionless atoms.

But when he raised his head again, he still saw his son beckoning, even beckoning to him to mount along with him to Heaven.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

THE ANGEL OF DEATH.

ATHOS was at this point of his marvellous vision when the charm was suddenly broken by a loud noise that came from behind the outward gates of the mansion.

The galloping of a horse was heard on the hardened sand of the grand avenue, and the sound of voices engaged in a very animated and clamorous conversation reached even to the chamber where the count was dreaming.

But Athos did not stir from the place he occupied; he scarcely turned his head to the door to ascertain the sooner what was the meaning of this uproar.

The horse, which a moment ago was galloping so swiftly, now departed slowly for the stables, while heavy footsteps entered the main hall and went up the stairs. Groans now

and then formed the accompaniment of these footsteps, which soon drew near the bedroom of Athos.

Then the door was opened, and Athos, turning a little to the side from which the noise proceeded, said in a feeble voice :

“The courier from Africa, is it not?”

“No, M. le Comte,” answered a voice, at the sound of which Raoul’s father started up in his bed.

“Grimaud !” he murmured.

And the moisture flowed down his sunken cheeks.

Grimaud stood upon the threshold. But not the Grimaud we used to know, kept young by his courage and devotion, the first to leap into the boat that was to carry Raoul de Bragelonne to the vessels of the royal fleet.

An austere, pallid old man, his clothes covered with dust, his scanty hair whitened by years, he trembled as he leaned against the door-frame, and was near falling when he beheld, at some distance from him, his master’s face.

These two men who had lived together so long in a certain intercommunity of the understanding, whose habit it was to be so economical of words, for their eyes said so much without them, these two old men, equally noble in heart if unequal in birth and fortune, stared at each other in speechless dismay, for they had read at a glance the depths of each other’s soul.

Grimaud bore on his countenance the impress of an anguish that was already old, that had grown familiar to him. He seemed to have at his command but one single version of his thoughts. Once he had made it his habit never to speak ; now it had become his habit never to smile.

Athos read all these shades on the face of this faithful servant, and in the tones he would have adopted in speaking to Raoul during his vision, he said :

“Grimaud, Raoul is dead, is he not?”

Behind Grimaud stood the other servants, with hearts palpitating, with eyes riveted on the sick man’s couch. They heard the terrible question ; it was followed by an awful silence.

“Yes,” answered the old man, tearing the monosyllable from his throat with a hoarse sigh.

Then arose groans, and lamentations, and prayers, and sobs, that filled the chamber in which the agonized father sought with his eyes the portrait of his son.

All this was for Athos like the transition that had led him to his dream.

Without uttering a cry, without shedding a tear, as mild, patient, and resigned as the martyrs of old, he raised his eyes to heaven as if to behold again, rising above the mountain of Djidgelli, the dear shade that had vanished from his eyes at the moment of Grimaud's arrival.

Doubtless when he looked upward there was a renewal of the marvellous vision, and he passed along the same paths through which that terrible yet sweet vision had once before conducted him, for, after closing his eyes, he opened them again and smiled; he had just seen Raoul and he, too, had smiled on him.

With his hands joined over his breast, with his face turned to the window and bathed by the cool night air which brought to his pillow the perfumes of the flowers and the woods, Athos entered into the contemplation of that Paradise the living may never see, entered never to leave it again.

God wished without doubt to open to his elect one the treasures of eternal beatitude at the very hour when other men tremble at thought of the severe reception they may meet at the hands of the Lord, and cling ardently to the life they know, in dread of that other life which they see dimly by the glimmer of the sombre torches of death.

Athos was guided by the pure and serene soul of the son, which yearned after the soul of the father; and this righteous man found only harmony and perfume on the rough path which the soul must take before it returns to its celestial abode.

After an hour of this ecstasy Athos gently raised his milk-white hands; the smile never left his lips, and he murmured, murmured so low that he could hardly be heard, three words addressed to God or to Raoul:

“HERE I AM!”

And his hands fell back slowly as if he were himself resting them on the bed.

Death had come in kindly and benignant guise to this noble being. It had spared him the tortures of the last agony, the convulsions of the last journey; it had opened with a gracious finger the gates of eternity to this illustrious and radiant soul.

God had ordained it so, no doubt, in order that the pious memory of that sweet death might remain in the memory of

the spectators and in the memory of other men, for it was a death calculated to make those who, because of their blameless lives here, dread not the last judgment, hunger and thirst after the life beyond.

Even in his eternal sleep Athos kept that placid, sincere smile; it remained with him when he was laid in the tomb. Indeed, such was the repose of his features, the serenity of the lines on that dead face, that for a long time his servants could not believe he had quitted life.

The count's people tried to lead away Grimaud, who had his eyes riveted on that pallid face, but did not approach it from the pious fear of bringing to it the breath of death. But Grimaud, exhausted though he was, refused to go. He sat down on the threshold, guarding his master with the vigilance of a sentinel, jealously resolved to receive his first look if he awoke, his last sigh if he was dying.

Every voice in the house was hushed, every murmur stilled, every one respected the sleep of his seigneur. But Grimaud had listened with such intentness that at length he perceived the count no longer breathed. He raised himself upon his hands, and, without stirring from his place, watched to see if he could not note some movement in his master's body. None! Terror seized him; he rose up to his full height, and at the same moment heard steps on the stairs. The jingling of a spur knocking against a sword, a warlike sound familiar to his ears, accompanied the steps and came to a sudden stop just as he was advancing to the bed of Athos. A voice, more vibrating than even bronze or steel, resounded within three paces of him.

"Athos! Athos! my friend!" cried this voice, trembling with unshed tears.

"M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan," stammered Grimaud.

"Where is he?" asked the musketeer.

Grimaud clutched his arm with his bony fingers, and pointed to the bed upon the sheets of which the livid tints of the dead body could be already seen.

A gasping respiration, rather than a sharp cry, swelled the throat of D'Artagnan. He advanced on tiptoe, shivering, frightened even at the noise he himself made on the floor, his heart rent by nameless anguish. He placed his ear on the breast of Athos, his face over his mouth. Not a sound, not a breath. D'Artagnan recoiled in dismay. This was

a revelation to Grimaud, who had followed every one of his movements. The old servant sat down timidly at the foot of the bed, and pressed his lips to the part of the sheet under which lay the feet of his master. Then big tears flowed down from his reddened eyes.

This hopeless old man, weeping silently and with bowed head, was the most affecting spectacle D'Artagnan had ever witnessed in the course of his agitated and checkered life.

D'Artagnan stood rapt in the contemplation of that friend, dead yet smiling, who seemed to have retained his latest thoughts as a greeting from the other world for the comrade he had loved best after Raoul, and in response to this flattering hospitality, D'Artagnan kissed Athos on the forehead and closed his eyes with his trembling fingers.

Then he sat down fearlessly by the pillow of him who had been so kind and gracious to him for thirty-five years. He fed greedily on the memories brought back to him by those noble features, some as bright and charming as his smile, others as sombre and chilling as the face with its eyes now closed for eternity.

Suddenly the bitter tide that had been mounting every minute invaded his heart and convulsed his breast. Incapable of mastering his emotion, he rose and tore himself from that chamber in which he had found the dead body of him to whom he was bringing the news of the death of Porthos, and broke forth into such agonizing sobs that the servants, who appeared to be only waiting for some such outburst, answered with their dismal lamentations, and the dogs with their doleful howls.

Grimaud alone did not lift up his voice. He would not have dared to profane death, even in the very paroxysm of his grief, or for the first time disturb the sleep of his master; and besides, that master had habituated him to silence.

At daybreak D'Artagnan, who had been wandering through the lower hall, biting his fists to stifle his sighs, went upstairs for the second time, and, making a sign to Grimaud, when the old man's head was turned in his direction, beckoned to him to come with him. The faithful servitor obeyed without making more noise than a shadow.

D'Artagnan went downstairs, followed by Grimaud. Once in the vestibule, he said:

"Grimaud, I have seen how the father died, tell me how died the son."

Grimaud drew from his breast a letter addressed to Athos; D'Artagnan recognized the writing of M. de Beaufort. He broke the seal and began reading it by the first bluish rays of the dawn, while pacing the gloomy linden avenue where the footprints of the dead count were still visible.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

THE BULLETIN.

THE Duc de Beaufort wrote to Athos. The letter, intended for the living, only reached the dead. God had changed the address.

"My dear count," wrote the prince, in his big, clumsy, school-boy handwriting, *"we have met with a great misfortune in the middle of a great triumph. The King has lost one of his bravest soldiers. I have lost a friend. You have lost M. de Bragelonne.*

"He died gloriously, so gloriously that I have not the strength to weep over him as much as I should wish.

"Receive my sad compliments, my dear count. Heaven sends us trials to match the greatness of our hearts. This one is terrible, but not above your courage.

"Your good friend,

"LE DUC DE BEAUFORT."

This letter inclosed a narrative written by one of the prince's secretaries. It was a true and touching account of the dismal episode that had launched two lives into eternity.

D'Artagnan, accustomed to the emotions of the battlefield, and with a heart steeled against affliction, could not help starting when he read the name of Raoul, that beloved youth, now become a shade, like his father.

"Monseigneur le Duc," reported the secretary, "ordered an attack in the morning. The Normandy and Picardy regiments had taken position among the gray rocks commanded by the slope of the mountain upon which arose the bastions of Djidgelli.

"The action began with artillery; the regiments marched full of resolution. The prince watched attentively the move-

ments of the troops, ready to support them with a strong reserve, if necessary. Near monseigneur were his oldest captains and his aides-de-camp. M. de Bragelonne had received orders not to quit his Highness.

“However, the enemy’s cannon, which had at first thundered with but indifferent success against the masses, had regulated its fire, and the balls, now better directed, killed several of those around the prince. The regiments, formed in column and advancing against the ramparts, were rather roughly treated. Our troops, seeing that they were poorly seconded by the artillery, hesitated. In fact, the batteries which had been established the evening before had a weak and uncertain aim on account of their position. The direction, from low to high, diminished the accuracy of the shots as well as their range.

“Monseigneur, seeing the bad position of the siege artillery, commanded the vessels moored in the little roadstead to begin a regular fire against the fortifications. M. de Bragelonne was the first to offer to carry this order; but monseigneur refused to permit him.

“Monseigneur was right, for he liked this young nobleman and did not wish him to risk his life in such a desperate enterprise. The result justified his foresight and his refusal. Hardly had the sergeant, to whom his Highness entrusted the mission asked for by M. de Bragelonne, reached the shore, when two shots from the enemy’s blunderbusses laid him low. The sergeant fell upon the wet sand, which drank his blood. At this sight, M. de Bragelonne smiled, whereupon monseigneur said to him :

“ ‘ You see, viscount, I have saved your life. Later on you must tell the Comte de la Fère about this. If he hears of it from you, he will be grateful to me.’

“The young gentleman smiled sadly, and answered :

“ ‘ Yes, monseigneur, but for your great kindness I should be where the poor sergeant is and at rest.’

“M. de Bragelonne uttered these words in such a tone that monseigneur answered sharply :

“ ‘ Just God ! young man, you talk as if your mouth was watering after death. But by the soul of Henri IV. ! I promised to take you back to your father safe and sound, and, please the Lord, I’ll keep my word.’

“M. de Bragelonne reddened, and said, in an undertone :

“ ‘Pardon me, monseigneur, but I have always liked to seek opportunities to distinguish myself, and surely it would be sweet to distinguish one’s self in the presence of such a general as M. de Beaufort.’

“ This answer somewhat mollified the duke, who turned to the officers thronging around him, and gave different orders.

“ The grenadiers of the two regiments advanced near enough the ditches to throw their grenades, but this produced little effect.

“ However, M. d’Estrées, who commanded the fleet, having witnessed the attempt made by the sergeant to reach him, understood that it was necessary to act without orders, and opened fire.

“ Then the Arabs, hit by the balls fired by the vessels, and seeing the wretched walls of their fortifications falling about them, gave vent to fearful howls. Their horsemen galloped down the mountain, bending to their horses’ manes, and fell upon the columns of infantry, who crossed their pikes and stopped the furious charge. Repulsed by the firm attitude of the battalion, the Arabs turned aside and flung themselves on the staff, which was not guarded at the moment. The danger was extreme. Monseigneur drew his sword, his secretaries and the officers of his suite imitated him, and engaged in a fierce struggle with these madmen.

“ M. de Bragelonne had now an opportunity of satisfying the craving he had manifested at the beginning of the action. He fought beside the prince with all the vigor of an ancient Roman, and killed three Arabs with his short sword. But it was evident that his bravery did not spring from that sentiment of pride natural to the warrior. It was too impetuous, too forced, even; he sought to intoxicate himself with noise and carnage. He heated himself to that degree that monseigneur called out to him to stop. He must have heard the prince’s voice, for all of us who were as near monseigneur as he was heard it. Instead of obeying it, however, he dashed forward towards the entrenchments.

“ As M. de Bragelonne had always proved obedient to discipline, this conduct on his part surprised every one; and M. de Beaufort shouted at the top of his voice:

“ ‘Stop, Bragelonne! Where are you going? Stop, I say! I command you!’

“ We had all raised our hands, imitating the duke’s gesture.

We all expected the horseman to turn rein; but he still galloped towards the palisades.

“‘Stop, Bragelonne!’ repeated the prince, as loud as he could, ‘stop, in the name of your father!’”

“At these words, M. de Bragelonne turned round, his features expressive of the keenest sorrow, but he did not halt. We then came to the conclusion that his horse was running away with him.

When M. le Duc surmised that the viscount was no longer master of his horse, and saw him pass beyond the first line of grenadiers, his Highness cried:

“‘Musketeers, kill his horse. A hundred pistoles to the man who brings down the horse!’”

“But how could any one hope to hit the beast and miss his rider? No one dared to fire for a time. At length a sharpshooter of the Picardy regiment aimed and hit the animal in the crupper, for we saw the blood redden his hair. But instead of falling the cursed jennet dashed on more madly than before.

“The whole Picardy regiment, seeing this unfortunate young man rushing to his death, cried out: ‘Throw yourself off, M. le Vicomte! throw yourself off!’”

“For M. de Bragelonne was loved by the entire army.

“The viscount was now within pistol-shot of the ramparts. There was a volley, and he was hidden by the fire and smoke. We lost sight of him; but the smoke was dissipated, and we saw him standing on his feet; his horse had just been killed. The Arabs summoned him to surrender; he refused with a shake of his head, and continued to advance towards the palisades. This was fearfully imprudent. Still, the soldiers were thankful to him for not retreating, now that he had the misfortune to advance so far. He marched forward a few steps more, and the men clapped their hands.

“At this moment a second discharge shook the wall, and the Vicomte de Bragelonne again disappeared from view. But when the smoke cleared away this time, he was no longer standing. He was stretched among the bushes, with his head lower than his legs, and the Arabs were about to issue from their entrenchments for the purpose of cutting off his head or carrying away his body, as is the custom of the infidels.

“The Duc de Beaufort had followed all this intently, and the spectacle had forced great and painful sighs from his

breast. He cried aloud, then, when he saw the Arabs among the mastic-trees :

“ Grenadiers, pikemen, will you let them take that noble body ? ”

“ And waving his sword, he galloped himself towards the enemy. The regiments dashed after him, uttering cries as terrible as those of the enemy were savage. The combat was renewed over the body of M. de Bragelonne, and was so furious that one hundred and sixty of the Arabs and at least fifty of our men bit the dust. It was a lieutenant of the Normandy regiment who took the body on his shoulder and carried it into our lines.

“ However, we pursued our advantage ; the regiments took the reserves with them and overturned the enemy’s palisades. At three the fire of the Arabs ceased ; and there was a fight in which the bayonet played the principal part ; it lasted two hours, and was simply a massacre. At five we were victorious at all points ; the enemy abandoned his positions, and M. de Beaufort planted the white flag on the highest point of the little hill.

“ We were then able to turn our attention to M. de Bragelonne, who had been shot eight times through the body and had lost nearly all his blood. Nevertheless, he still breathed ; the joy of monseigneur was unspeakable, and he determined to be present at the dressing of the wounds and at the consultation of the surgeons. Two of the latter declared that M. de Bragelonne would live. Monseigneur embraced them, and promised each a thousand louis if the viscount was saved.

“ M. de Bragelonne heard these transports of joy, and, whether he despaired of recovery or was suffering from his wounds, his face expressed a disappointment that gave much food for thought, particularly to one of the secretaries, in view of what occurred afterwards.

“ The third surgeon to arrive was Brother Sylvain de Saint-Cosme, the ablest one amongst us. He probed the wounds, but said nothing.

“ M. de Bragelonne opened his eyes, and seemed to follow eagerly every motion, every thought of the skilful surgeon.

“ When questioned by the prince, Brother Sylvain replied that three out of the eight wounds were mortal, but that the viscount had such a strong constitution, and youth has such vitality, and God is so merciful, that M. de Brage-

lonne might recover, provided he did not make the slightest movement.

“He added, turning to his assistants :

“ ‘Above all, do not let him move even a finger, or you will kill him.’

“And we left the tent, with a little hope in our hearts.

“The secretary before mentioned believed he saw, as he was passing out, a pale, sad smile hovering on the viscount’s lips when the duke said to him, in a soothing tone :

“ ‘Oh, Bragelonne, we’ll save you !’

“But at nightfall, when we believed that the patient was resting, one of the assistants, after entering his tent, rushed out with loud cries.

“We all ran up to him in a state of the wildest excitement, — M. le Duc along with us, — and the assistant showed us M. de Bragelonne’s body on the ground, at the foot of his bed, and all bathed in blood.

“Apparently he must have experienced some fresh convulsion, some feverish agitation, during which he fell out of the bed, and this fall, as Brother Sylvain had predicted, had hastened his end.

“We raised him up ; he was cold, dead. In his right hand was a lock of fair hair, pressed closely to his heart.”

Then followed details about the expedition and the victory gained over the Arabs.

D’Artagnan stopped at the account of poor Raoul’s death.

“The unhappy boy !” he murmured, “a suicide !” and turning his eyes in the direction of the chamber where Athos was sleeping his eternal sleep :

“They kept their word to each other,” he whispered to himself. “Surely they are now happy, they are reunited.”

And he returned through the garden with slow and melancholy steps.

The entire village and the whole neighborhood were filled already with grieving friends relating to one another the double catastrophe, and making preparations for the funeral.

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

THE LAST CANTO OF THE POEM.

THE next day saw the arrival of most of the nobles of the province, and of nobles from neighboring provinces, and indeed from wherever messengers had arrived in time to notify them.

D'Artagnan had shut himself up in his chamber, not wishing to see anybody. The weight of two such deaths falling on the captain after the death of Porthos had for the time crushed a spirit that had, until then, been invincible. Except Grimaud, who entered once, he saw neither guests nor servants. He knew from the noises in the house and the constant coming and going that preparations were being made for the funeral. He wrote to the King, asking an extension of his leave.

Grimaud, who, as we have said, had entered D'Artagnan's room, sat down upon a stool near the door like a man who is thinking deeply; then rising, he made a sign to D'Artagnan to follow him. The latter obeyed silently. Grimaud descended to the count's bedroom, pointed to the empty bed, and raised his eyes eloquently to heaven.

"Yes," returned D'Artagnan, "yes, my good Grimaud; after the son he loved so much."

Grimaud passed out of the apartment and went to the drawing-room, where, according to the custom of the province, the corpse was laid out in state before being buried.

D'Artagnan was amazed to see two open coffins there. At the mute invitation of Grimaud he approached, and beheld in one of them Athos, beautiful even in death, and in the other Raoul, with eyes shut and cheeks pearly as those of Virgil's Pallas and a smile on his violet lips. He shuddered on seeing father and son, those two departed souls, represented on earth by two lifeless bodies, incapable of touching each other, though so near.

"Raoul here!" he murmured. "Oh! Grimaud, you did not tell me this!"

Grimaud shook his head, but did not answer. Taking D'Artagnan by the hand he led him to the bier, and showed

under the thin shroud the wounds through which the soul had fled.

The captain turned his eyes away, and, deeming it useless to question the old man, who would not answer, he remembered that M. de Beaufort's secretary had written a good deal more than he had had the courage to read.

Resuming, then, the perusal of the narrative of the affair that had cost Raoul his life, he found these words forming the last paragraph of the report :

"M. le Duc ordered the body of M. le Vicomte to be embalmed, after the fashion practised among the Arabs when they wish their bodies to be brought back to the place of their birth ; he also appointed relays, so that a confidential servant, who had reared the young man, might be enabled to carry his coffin to the Comte de la Fère."

"And so," mused D'Artagnan, "I shall follow thee to the grave, my dear child, I who am already old and no longer of any use on the earth, and I shall scatter the dust upon that brow upon which I imprinted a kiss not two months ago. God has willed it so. Thou thyself hast willed it so. I have no longer the right even to weep ; thou hast sought thy own death ; it seemed to thee preferable to life."

At length arrived the moment when the cold relics of these two gentlemen were to be returned to earth.

The crowds of soldiers and of the common people that had flocked to the place of interment — near a chapel in the plain — was so great that the village road was thronged with persons on horseback and on foot in mourning garb.

Athos had chosen for his last abode the little close of this chapel, which had been erected near the boundary of his estate. It was constructed of stones, cut in 1550, which he had ordered to be brought from the old Gothic manor in Berri which had sheltered his childhood.

The chapel, thus, as it were, transported and rebuilt, presented a cheerful aspect beneath a clump of poplars and sycamores. Mass was offered up in it every Sunday by the curé of the neighboring hamlet, to whom Athos had paid two hundred livres yearly for his services ; and all the vassals of his domain, — forty or thereabouts, — as well as the laborers and farmers and their families, went there to hear mass, and were not obliged to travel to town for the purpose.

Behind the chapel stretched, surrounded by two thick hedges

of hazel, elder, and whitethorn, and by a deep ditch, the uncultivated little close. But charming was it in its wildness, for the mosses were tall, and the wild heliotropes and the wall-flowers mingled their perfumes, and a big spring, imprisoned in a marble cistern, gushed out from beneath the chestnuts, and thousands of bees from the neighboring plains came to alight on the thyme, which was everywhere, while chaffinches and robin red-breasts sang joyously on the flowers of the hedges.

It was to this spot the two coffins were brought in the midst of a silent and reverent multitude.

The office of the dead having been celebrated, the last farewells paid to the noble departed, the mourners scattered, conversing along the highways about the virtues and gentle end of the father, and of the hopes the son had given and his melancholy doom on an African shore.

And then every sound died away, like the lamps lit in the humble nave. The priest bowed for the last time before the altar and the newly-made graves; then, followed by his altarboy, who rang a hoarse bell, he took his way to the presbytery.

D'Artagnan, left alone, perceived that night was falling. He had forgotten the hour in thinking of the dead. He got up from the oaken bench upon which he was sitting in the chapel, and, like the priest, decided to go and take a last farewell of the grave that held his two friends.

A woman was kneeling and praying on the damp earth.

D'Artagnan paused at the threshold of the chapel, so as not to disturb this woman, and also to see who was the pious friend that had come to accomplish a sacred duty with such zeal and perseverance.

The stranger had her face hidden in her hands — hands as white as alabaster. It was easy to guess, from the noble simplicity of her costume, that she was a woman of distinction. Outside the enclosure several horses mounted by lackeys and a travelling carriage were waiting for her. She continued praying, often wiping her eyes with her handkerchief. D'Artagnan knew then that she was weeping. He saw her beat her breast with the pitiless compunction of the Christian woman. He heard her repeatedly utter this cry, which evidently came from an ulcerated heart: "Pardon! pardon!"

And as she gave way entirely to her grief, as she fell half

fainting in the midst of her prayers and lamentations, D'Artagnan, affected by such love for his lost and regretted friends, took a few steps towards the tomb to interrupt this dismal colloquy between the penitent and the dead.

But as soon as his footsteps sounded on the gravel the stranger raised her head and showed D'Artagnan a face bathed in tears — the face of a friend.

It was Mademoiselle de la Vallière.

"M. d'Artagnan!" she murmured.

"You!" replied the captain, darkly; "you here! Oh! madame, I should have preferred to see you adorned with flowers in the manor of the Comte de la Fère. You would have wept less, and they and I also!"

"Monsieur!" said she, sobbing.

"For it was you," continued the pitiless friend of the dead, "it was you who laid these two men in their graves."

"Oh! spare me!"

"God forbid, madame, that I should offend a woman, or make her weep to no purpose; but I must say that the place of the murderer is not near the tomb of the victims."

She tried to answer.

"What I am saying to you now," he went on, coldly, "I have already said to the King."

She clasped her hands.

"I know," said she, "that I am the cause of the Vicomte de Bragelonne's death."

"Ah! you know that, do you?"

"The news reached the court yesterday. I travelled forty leagues last night to come here and beg the pardon of the count, whom I believed to be still alive, and to beseech God, upon the grave of Raoul, to send me all the misfortunes I deserve except one. I know now, monsieur, that the death of the son killed the father. I have two crimes with which to reproach myself; two punishments to expect from God."

"I will repeat to you, mademoiselle, what M. de Bragelonne said to me about you at Antibes, when he was already looking forward to his death:

"'If pride and coquetry have lead her astray I pardon and despise her. If love has occasioned her fall I pardon her, and swear that never could any one have loved her as I have.'"

"You know," interrupted Louise, "that because of my love

I was about to sacrifice myself ; you know what my sufferings were when I met you, when I was lost, dying, forsaken. Well, never have I suffered as I have done to-day, because then I had hopes, I had desires, while to-day I have nothing to hope or wish for ; because death has laid all my joy in his tomb ; because I dare no longer love without remorse, and because I feel that the man I love — oh ! it is the law ! — will repay me with the tortures I have made others endure.”

D’Artagnan did not answer. He was only too sure she was not mistaken.

“ Then, dear M. d’Artagnan, do not crush me to-day, I implore you. I am like the branch that is torn away from the trunk, I can no longer cling to anything in this world, and I know not whither the current is hurrying me. I love madly, love to such a degree that, — impious creature that I am ! — I do not hesitate to proclaim my love above the ashes of the dead, do not blush at it, feel no remorse because of it. This love is with me a religion. But later on you will see me deserted, forgotten, despised ; you will see that with which I am fated to be punished. Spare me then my fleeting happiness ; leave it to me for a few days, a few minutes. Perhaps it has ceased to exist at the very moment I am speaking to you. Ah ! perhaps this double murder is already expiated ! ”

She was still speaking, when the sound of voices and the tramping of horses attracted the captain’s attention.

An officer of the King, M. de Saint-Aignan, came to Mademoiselle de la Vallière on the part of the sovereign, who, he said, was devoured by jealousy and uneasiness.

De Saint-Aignan did not see D’Artagnan, who was half hidden by the thick foliage of the chestnut tree that shaded the two graves.

Louise thanked and dismissed him with a gesture, and he left the enclosure.

“ You see, madame,” said the captain, bitterly, “ you see that your happiness lasts still.”

The young woman raised her head with a solemn air.

“ You will some day repent of judging me so badly,” she answered. “ On that day, monsieur, I will pray to God to forgive you for your injustice. For that matter, I shall then suffer such anguish that you will pity my sufferings. Do not reproach me with my present happiness, M. d’Artagnan ; it is costing me dear, and I have not yet paid all my debt.”

And after these words, she knelt down again, gently and lovingly.

"Forgive me for the last time, Raoul, my betrothed," said she, "forgive me for having severed the tie that bound us. We were both fated to die of grief. Thou hast been the first to depart. Do not fear, I will follow thee. Thou seest I have not been a coward, and have come to bid thee this last farewell. God is my witness, Raoul, that if my life could have ransomed thine, it should have been freely given. But I could not give thee my love. Once more forgive me."

She gathered a branch and fixed it in the earth, then wiped her eyes swimming in tears, bowed to D'Artagnan, and disappeared.

After gazing for a time at the departure of horses, riders, and carriages, the captain crossed his arms upon his swelling chest.

"When will it be my turn to depart?" he murmured, with emotion. "What is left to man after youth and love and glory and friendship and riches? The rock beneath which sleeps Porthos, who possessed all I have named; the moss beneath which repose Athos and Raoul, who possessed much more!"

He paused for a moment, his eyes dull and haggard; then drawing himself up:

"Forward! ever forward!" he exclaimed. "When my time comes, God will warn me of it, as he has warned the others!"

He touched with his fingers the earth moistened by the evening dews, crossed himself, as if he had been standing beside the holy-water font of a church, and set out alone — now alone forever — on the road to Paris.

EPILOGUE.

Four years after the scenes we have just described, two well-mounted cavaliers passed through Blois at daybreak for the purpose of arranging a falcon party the King desired to have in that broken plain which the Loire cuts in two, and which borders on Meung on one side and on Amboise on the other.

They were the captains of the royal greyhounds and falcons, highly respected personages in the days of Louis XIII., but not so highly thought of by his successor.

These two cavaliers were returning, after reconnoitring the ground and making their observations, when they noticed little

scattered bands of soldiers, who were being stationed by their sergeants at regular distances before the openings of the enclosures. The soldiers belonged to the King's musketeers.

Behind them on a noble charger rode their captain, easily recognizable by his gold embroideries. He had gray hair, and his beard was getting gray also. He seemed a little bent, although he managed his horse with ease, and looked around him with an eye as watchful as ever.

"M. d'Artagnan does not grow a day older," said the captain of the greyhounds to his colleague, the falconer. "Though he is ten years older than either of us, he has the seat of a young cadet in the saddle."

"True," answered the falconer, "for the twenty years I have known him he has always been the same."

This officer was in error. D'Artagnan had really lived a dozen years during the last four. Age had left the marks of its pitiless claws at each corner of his eyes; his forehead was bald, his hands, once so brown and sinewy, showed by their whiteness that the blood was already getting rather chilly in that quarter.

D'Artagnan approached the two officers with that pleasant but distinctive affability which marks superior men. In exchange for his courtesy he was greeted with two bows full of respect.

"Ah! what a lucky chance it is to see you here, M. d'Artagnan!" cried the falconer.

"I think it is rather I who should say that, gentlemen," replied the captain. "At the present day the King is more inclined to make use of his musketeers than of his falconers."

"It's not as it was in the good old times," sighed the falconer. "You remember, M. d'Artagnan, when the King used to fly the pie among the vines beyond Beaugency. Ah! M. d'Artagnan, you were not captain of the musketeers in those days!"

"And you were only corporal of the tiercels," retorted D'Artagnan, gayly. "Ah! it was a good time, for all that; it is always a good time when we are young. Good-day, monsieur," he added, addressing the captain of the greyhounds.

"You do me honor, M. le Comte," said the latter.

This title of count evidently made no impression on the musketeer; and naturally, for D'Artagnan had been a count during the last four years.

"The long journey you have just made has not wearied you, M. le Capitaine?" continued the falconer. "It is two hundred leagues from here to Pignerol, I think, is n't it?"

"Two hundred and sixty going, and the same returning," replied D'Artagnan, quietly.

"And," inquired the falconer, in an undertone, "is *he* well?"

"Who?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Poor M. Fouquet," explained the falconer, in the same low voice.

The captain of the greyhounds had prudently withdrawn aside.

"No," answered D'Artagnan, "the poor man is in deep affliction. He does not regard imprisonment as a favor, says parliament acquitted him when it banished him, and that banishment is freedom. It never seems to occur to him that his death was decided on, and that he ought to thank God for saving him from the claws of the parliament."

"Yes, poor fellow, he rubbed shoulders pretty close with the scaffold," rejoined the falconer; "it is even said that M. Colbert had sent an order for his execution to the governor of the Bastille."

"Enough!" said D'Artagnan, sadly, willing to change the conversation.

"Enough, indeed!" repeated the captain of the greyhounds, who had approached them. "If M. Fouquet is at Pignerol, he has well deserved it, and it was a piece of good fortune for him to be led there by you. He certainly stole enough from the King."

D'Artagnan darted one of his dangerous looks at the master of the hounds.

"Monsieur," said he, "if some one came and told me you had eaten your dog's meat, not only should I not believe it, but if you were sent to a dungeon for it, I should pity you, and would not suffer people to speak ill of you. Yet, monsieur, however honest you may be, I assert you are not more honest than was poor M. Fouquet."

After incurring this sharp rebuke, the captain of the greyhounds hung his head, and allowed the falconer to get two steps nearer than himself to D'Artagnan.

"Oh, he's satisfied," the falconer whispered to the musketeer; "it is easily seen greyhounds are all the fashion to-day; if he were a falconer he'd whistle a different tune."

D'Artagnan smiled sadly at seeing a great political question decided by such humble interests. He meditated for a moment on the splendid existence of the superintendent, his irreparable ruin, and the dismal death awaiting him. Then he asked :

“ Was M. Fouquet fond of falconry ? ”

“ Oh ! passionately, monsieur,” replied the falconer, with a sigh of bitter regret which might serve as the funeral oration of Fouquet.

D'Artagnan dismissed from his mind the ill-humor of the one and the regrets of the other, and pushed on into the plain.

They could already catch glimpses of the hunters at the openings into the wood, could see the plumes of the equerries darting like falling stars through the glades, and the white horses vanishing like luminous apparitions in the sombre thickets

“ But,” resumed D'Artagnan, “ will the sport continue long ? I should feel grateful if you gave us the bird speedily, for I am very tired. Will it be a heron or a swan ? ”

“ Both, M. d'Artagnan,” answered the falconer. “ But do not be uneasy. The King will not keep us long. He does not care for the sport for its own sake ; all he cares about is to have something that will amuse the ladies.”

The words “ the ladies ” were so emphasized that D'Artagnan pricked up his ears.

“ Ah ! ” he exclaimed, looking at the falconer with an air of surprise.

The captain of the hounds smiled, doubtless thinking to regain the musketeer's good-will.

“ Oh, you may laugh if you like,” said D'Artagnan ; “ I am really ignorant of everything ; I arrived only yesterday, after a month's absence. When I left, the court was sad on account of the queen mother's death. The King, after receiving her last sigh, refused to take part in any amusement. Everything has an end, though, and the King is no longer sad ; so much the better.”

“ Ay, and everything has a beginning,” answered the captain of the hounds, with a coarse laugh.

“ Ah ! ” exclaimed D'Artagnan, for the second time ; he was burning with curiosity, but dignity forbade him to question an inferior ; “ so there is something, you think, that has a beginning ? ”

The captain winked significantly. D'Artagnan, however, began to think he would as soon not hear anything from this man.

"Shall we see the King early?" he inquired of the falconer.

"At seven, monsieur; it is the hour at which I fly the birds."

"Who is coming with the King? How is Madame? How is the Queen?"

"Better."

"She has been ill, then?"

"Yes, monsieur, since her last annoyance her Majesty has been very poorly."

"What annoyance? Do not be afraid of telling me something I know already. I know nothing, for I have but just arrived."

"It seems the Queen, having been somewhat neglected since her mother-in-law's death, complained to the King, who answered:

"Do I not spend every evening with you, Madame. What can you want more?"

"Ah!" replied D'Artagnan, "poor woman! How she must hate Mademoiselle de la Vallière!"

"Oh, no, not Mademoiselle de la Vallière," answered the falconer.

"Whom else, pray?"

The winding of the horn interrupted the conversation. It summoned the dogs and the birds. The falconer and his companion at once clapped spurs to their horses, and D'Artagnan's curiosity was left ungratified.

The King appeared in the distance, surrounded by ladies and cavaliers. All the company were advancing in beautiful order, at a foot's pace, while the horns and trumpets animated the dogs and horses. There was an amount of bustle and movement and fairy-like splendor about the scene of which we cannot form any idea at the present day, unless it be from the artificial magnificence or fictitious majesty of a theatrical spectacle.

D'Artagnan's eyesight was a little weakened, but he was enabled to make out three carriages behind the party. The first was the Queen's. It was empty.

D'Artagnan, not seeing Mademoiselle de la Vallière at the

King's side, sought and found her in the second carriage. She was alone with her two women, both of them as weary-looking as their mistress.

A woman of the most magnificent beauty rode on the left of the King, mounted on a fiery steed which she managed with the greatest skill. The King smiled on her, and she smiled back at the King. Whenever she spoke every one burst into fits of laughter.

"I should know that woman," thought the musketeer; "who is she, I wonder?"

He rode up to his friend the falconer and asked him.

But before D'Artagnan could get an answer the King perceived him.

"Ah, count," said he, "so you are back. How is it I have not seen you?"

"Sire," replied the captain, "because your Majesty was asleep when I arrived, and you were not awake when I went on duty this morning."

"Ever the same," said Louis, aloud, unable to hide his satisfaction. "Go and have some rest; I order you to do so, count. You will dine with me to-day."

The murmurs of admiration that arose around D'Artagnan enfolded him as it were in one immense caress. He was congratulated on all sides. An invitation to dinner was an honor of which his Majesty was not so lavish as Henri IV. had been. The King passed on, and D'Artagnan found himself brought to a stand by a new group, in the centre of which shone Colbert.

"Good-day, M. d'Artagnan," said the minister, affably. "Have you had a pleasant journey?"

"Yes, monsieur," answered D'Artagnan.

"I heard the King invite you to his table to-night. You will meet an old friend there."

"An old friend?" inquired D'Artagnan, painfully sounding the gloomy waves of the past, which had swallowed up so many of his friendships and of his enmities.

"M. le Duc d'Alaméda, who arrived from Spain this morning."

"The Duc d'Alaméda?" repeated D'Artagnan, vainly trying to remember any person who bore that name.

"Myself!" said a white-haired old man, sitting bent in his carriage, which he had thrown open to make room for the musketeer.

"Aramis!" cried D'Artagnan, dazed with astonishment.

And he was so taken aback that he allowed his old comrade's thin arms to cling around his neck without responding to the embrace.

After observing them for a moment silently, Colbert spurred his horse, and left the two friends together.

"So," said the musketeer, taking his comrade by the arm, "you are actually in France, you the exile, you the rebel?"

"And I am going to dine in your company with the King," returned the Bishop of Vannes, smiling. "Yes, you may well ask what is the use of fidelity in this world. Stay, let us allow the carriage of poor La Vallière to pass by. Do you notice how anxious she looks? How her tearful eyes follow the King, who is yonder on horseback!"

"With whom?"

"With Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, now Madame de Montespan," replied Aramis.

"She is jealous; has she been abandoned, then?"

"Not yet, but she soon will be."

They chatted in this way while following the sport, and the coachman of Aramis drove them so skilfully that they were in time to see the falcon seize the bird, beat it down, and fall upon it.

The King dismounted, and Madame de Montespan did the same. They were in front of an isolated chapel, hidden by thick trees which had been already stripped of their foliage by the early winds of autumn. Behind the chapel was an enclosure into which a latticed gate opened. The falcon had forced its prey to fall into this enclosure, and the King decided on entering to take the first feather, according to custom. As the enclosure was too small to receive the entire party, the courtiers formed a circle around it and the chapel.

D'Artagnan held back Aramis, who wished to alight like the others, and said, curtly:

"Are you aware, Aramis, whither chance has led us?"

"No," replied the duke.

"Certain persons with whom I was long acquainted sleep their last sleep here," said D'Artagnan, in tones that trembled from sad recollections.

Aramis, without suspecting anything and with trembling footsteps, entered the church through the door pointed out to him by D'Artagnan.

"Where are they buried?" he inquired.

"Outside in the enclosure. Do you see yon cross under the little cypress? The cypress is growing out of their grave. Do not go near it. The King will be there in a moment, for the heron has fallen on it."

Aramis halted and concealed himself in the shade. Then they saw, unseen themselves, the pale face of La Vallière who, forgotten in her carriage, had at first contented herself with looking on sadly out of the carriage window. Then, stung by jealousy, she had made her way into the chapel, where, leaning against a pillar, she was contemplating the smiling monarch, who beckoned to Madame de Montespan to draw near and not be afraid.

Madame de Montespan approached and took the hand offered her by the King, who, plucking the first feather of the heron just killed by the falcon, fastened it in the hat of his fair companion. Smiling in her turn, she kissed tenderly the hand that had made her such a present. The King reddened with pleasure, and gazed on Madame de Montespan with all the fire of love and desire.

"What will you give me in exchange?" said he.

She broke off a branch from the cypress and presented it to the King, who was intoxicated with hope.

"Ah!" whispered Aramis to D'Artagnan, "it is but a sad gift, for that cypress shelters a grave."

"Yes," answered D'Artagnan, aloud, "and that grave is the grave of Raoul de Bragelonne, who sleeps under the mound beside Athos his father."

They heard a groan behind them; they turned and saw a woman fall fainting on the floor. Mademoiselle de la Vallière had seen, had heard everything.

"Poor woman," murmured D'Artagnan, who helped her women to bear her to her carriage. "Suffering is her portion henceforth."

That evening D'Artagnan was seated at the King's table with M. Colbert and the Duke of Alaméda.

The King was very gay. He paid numberless polite attentions to the Queen, as well as to Madame, who was seated on his left and looking very sad. The manner of Louis recalled those untroubled days when he used to watch his mother's eyes for her approval or her censure of whatever he had happened to say.

There was no hint as to the existence of mistresses at this dinner. The King spoke two or three times to Aramis, addressing him as M. l'Ambassadeur, increasing the wonder of D'Artagnan at seeing his friend the rebel so marvellously well received at court.

On rising from the table the King offered his hand to the Queen and made a sign to Colbert, whose eye was watching his master's.

Colbert took Aramis and D'Artagnan aside. The King began talking with his sister, while Monsieur, evidently uneasy, conversed with the Queen in an absent-minded sort of way, at the same time never ceasing to watch his wife and his brother from the corner of his eye.

The conversation between Colbert, Aramis, and D'Artagnan turned upon indifferent subjects. They spoke of the preceding ministers. Colbert talked of Mazarin and asked questions about Richelieu.

D'Artagnan was struck dumb with amazement at the inexhaustible knowledge, as well as at the gay humor, of this man with the low forehead and the bushy eyebrows. Aramis was astonished by that airiness of temperament which enabled a man of a really serious nature to defer advantageously the moment for the grave discussion to which no one made any allusion, though all three felt that it was imminent.

The embarrassed air of Monsieur told how much he was annoyed by the dialogue between the King and Madame. The princess's eyes were almost red. Was she complaining? was she going to create a little scandal before the whole court?

The King took her aside, and in tones that must have reminded her of the days when she was loved for herself alone, he said :

"Sister, why have those beautiful eyes wept so much?"

"But, Sire—" she was going to answer.

"Monsieur is jealous, is he not?"

She looked in the direction of Monsieur, an infallible sign that told that prince they were talking about him.

"Yes," she replied.

"Now," said the King, "if your friends compromise you it is not Monsieur's fault."

He spoke so gently that Madame felt encouraged, though the sorrows she had endured so long made her feel as if her heart was breaking, and she was very nearly bursting into tears.

"Come, my dear sister," said the King, "tell me what your troubles are. On the word of a brother I promise to sympathize with them, and on the word of a king I promise to put an end to them!"

She raised her beautiful eyes, and said sadly :

"My friends do not compromise me. They are absent or have to conceal themselves. These friends, though so good, loyal, and devoted, have lost your Majesty's favor."

"You are speaking of Guiche, whom I exiled at Monsieur's request?"

"And who, since his wrongful exile, has tried to get himself killed once every day!"

"Wrongful, you say, sister?"

"So wrongful that but for the affection as well as the respect I have always felt for your Majesty—"

"Well?"

"I should have asked my brother Charles, who would do anything for me—"

The King started.

"To do what, pray?"

"To suggest to you that you ought not to allow the Chevalier de Lorraine to be the murderer of my honor and happiness."

"The Chevalier de Lorraine," said the King, "the man with the sinister face?"

"He is my deadly enemy. So long as he lives in my house, where Monsieur keeps him and makes him all-powerful, I shall be the most wretched woman in your kingdom."

"So," said the King, slowly, "you think your brother of England a better friend than I am."

"Actions speak for themselves, Sire."

"And you would prefer asking help of—"

"My country! Yes, Sire," she answered, proudly.

The King answered:

"You are the grandchild of Henri IV. like myself, my dear. Do you not think that being your cousin and brother-in-law, I am quite as close to you as if I were your brother-german?"

"Then," said Henrietta, "act."

"Let us make an alliance."

"Begin."

"I have, you say, wrongfully exiled Guiche?"

"Oh! yes," she answered, blushing.

“Guiche shall return.”

“Good.”

“And now you say that I act unjustly in allowing the Chevalier de Lorraine, who gives evil advice to Monsieur, to live in your house?”

“Remember what I am about to tell you, Sire. Some day or other the Chevalier de Lorraine — if ever I come to an untimely end, Sire, I accuse the Chevalier de Lorraine in advance — he has a soul that is capable of any crime.”

“The Chevalier de Lorraine shall not trouble you further. I promise you that.”

“Then, Sire, that will be a genuine preamble to our alliance, and I will sign it. But since you have done your part, tell me what mine is to be.”

“Instead of quarrelling with me, your brother Charles must be a closer friend to me than ever.”

“There will be no difficulty about that.”

“Oh, more than you imagine. In ordinary friendships all that is needed are mutual embracing and feasting, which cost only a kiss or a reception, trifling expenses; but in political friendships —”

“Ah! this is to be a political friendship?”

“Yes, sister, and then, instead of embraces and festivities, it is soldiers fully alive and fully armed that you must serve up to your friend; men-of-war fully armed and fully provisioned. Now our coffers are not always well enough supplied to enable us to make these sort of friendly offerings.”

“You are right there,” replied Madame. “The King of England’s coffers have had a hollow ring about them for some time past, whenever any one has tried to tap them.”

“But, sister, you have such influence over your brother that you may obtain what an ambassador could never be able to obtain.”

“But to do so I should have to go to London, my dear brother.”

“The very thing I have been thinking of myself,” answered the King, eagerly. “It has struck me that such a journey might be a distraction, an amusement.”

“Still, I may fail. The English King has dangerous counsellors.”

“Male or female?”

“Female. If, perchance, your Majesty’s intention were to

make an alliance — I am only suggesting a hypothesis — for warlike purposes — ”

“ For warlike purposes ? ”

“ Yes. Well, in that case, the King’s counsellors, who number seven,— Miss Stewart, Miss Wells, Miss Gwyn, Miss Orchay, Miss Zunga, Miss Daws, and the Countess of Castlemaine,— will represent to the King that wars cost a great deal of money, and that the money would be much better spent in giving balls and suppers at Hampton Court than in equipping vessels of the line at Portsmouth or Greenwich.”

“ And then your negotiation will break down ? ”

“ Oh, these ladies see to it that all negotiations break down which they do not themselves conduct.”

“ Do you know the idea that has got into my head, sister ? ”

“ No, what is it ? ”

“ That if we were to seek around us, we might find a counsellor you could take with you to the King, a counsellor, too, whose eloquence would paralyze the ill-will of all the seven others.”

“ It is, Sire, a capital idea, and I shall begin to seek at once.”

“ Seek, and you shall find.”

“ I hope so.”

“ The counsellor ought to have a pretty face. A pretty face is pleasanter than an ugly one, is it not ? ”

“ Assuredly.”

“ A lively, playful, audacious disposition ? ”

“ Certainly.”

“ Noble birth — just as much of it as is needed in order to approach the King without awkwardness. Not too much of it, lest the dignity of her race might give her qualms.”

“ Nothing could be more correct.”

“ And she ought to know a little English.”

“ *Mon Dieu !* some one like Mademoiselle de Kéroualle, for instance ? ” cried Madame, excitedly.

“ Why, yes, you have found her. You have found her, sister, and not I.”

“ I shall take her. She will have no cause to complain, I hope ? ”

“ No. I will appoint her *séductrice plénipotentiaire* at once and will add the dowry to the title.”

“ Good.”

“ I almost see you on the road, sister, and consoled for all your vexations.”

"I will set out on two conditions. First, I must know what I am to negotiate about."

"This is it. You are aware that the Dutch insult me every day in their newspapers and by their republican attitudes. I do not like republics."

"It is easy to understand that, Sire."

"Then these kings of the sea, as they style themselves, interfere with French commerce in the Indies, and their vessels will soon occupy every port in Europe. Such a power is too close to me, sister."

"But they are your allies?"

"And, therefore, they should not have struck the medal you know of, which represents Holland stopping the sun like Joshua, with this legend: 'In my presence the sun is stopped.' That was not a very friendly proceeding, sister."

"Oh, I thought you had forgotten a mere nothing like that."

"I never forget, sister. And if such true friends of mine as your brother will coöperate with me —"

The princess grew thoughtful.

"Listen. The empire of the sea is to be divided," continued Louis. "England is content that it should be divided. Why should not she and I share it as well as she and Holland?"

"Well, I suppose Mademoiselle de Kéroualle can treat that question," rejoined Madame.

"And now for your second condition, sister?"

"The consent of Monsieur, my husband."

"You shall have it."

"Then I will start immediately, brother."

As soon as the princess uttered these words, Louis XIV. turned towards the corner of the hall in which Colbert, Aramis, and D'Artagnan were talking, and made an affirmative sign to his minister. Colbert thereupon broke off the conversation, and said to Aramis:

"M. l'Ambassadeur, what if we were now to speak of business?"

D'Artagnan at once discreetly retired. He directed his steps towards the chimney, where he could hear what the King was going to say to Monsieur, who advanced to meet him, in a state of great agitation. The King's countenance was animated, upon his brow might be read that expression of an invincible will which no longer met with any opposition in France, and was soon to meet with none in Europe.

"Monsieur," said the King to his brother, "I am not pleased with the Chevalier de Lorraine. Since you do him the honor to protect him, pray advise him to travel for some months."

These words fell like the crash of an avalanche upon Monsieur, who adored his favorite, and lavished all his affection on him.

"In what respect has the chevalier displeased your Majesty?" he cried, hurling a look of fury at Madame.

"When he is gone I will tell you," replied the phlegmatic monarch; "or, at least, when Madame has started for England."

"Madame started for England!" muttered Monsieur, bewildered.

"In a week, brother," continued the King, "while we two will go where I will tell you."

After giving an affectionate smile to his brother to soften the harshness of these two pieces of news, the King turned on his heel.

During all this time Colbert was conversing with the Duke of Alaméda.

"Monsieur," Colbert was saying, "the time has come for an understanding between us. I have reconciled you with the King, as, indeed, it was my duty to do, considering that you are a man of such distinguished merit. But since you have occasionally given expression to your friendship in my regard, the time has now arrived to give me a proof of it. Moreover, you are a good deal more of a Frenchman than of a Spaniard. Answer me frankly. Will Spain remain neutral if we undertake any enterprise against the United Provinces?"

"Monsieur," returned Aramis, "the interest of Spain is plain enough. It is our policy to embroil Europe with the United Provinces, against which we still entertain the old rancor, ever since they wrested their freedom from us. But the King of France is the ally of the United Provinces. Besides, you are not ignorant, of course, that the war would be a maritime one, and I do not think France is in a condition to carry on such a war successfully."

Colbert at this moment perceived D'Artagnan, who was looking around for some one to talk with during the asides of the King and Monsieur.

He called him, and in an undertone to Aramis :

"We may talk before M. d'Artagnan?" said he.

"Oh, certainly," answered Aramis.

"M. d'Alaméda and I were just saying," continued Colbert, "that a war with the United Provinces would be a maritime war."

"That is self-evident," replied the musketeer.

"And what do you think about it, M. d'Artagnan?"

"I think that to wage a successful war on sea, we should have a very big army on land."

"What do you mean?" asked Colbert, who thought he must have misunderstood him.

"Why an army on land?" inquired Aramis.

"Because the King is sure to be beaten on sea if he have not the English on his side, and if he be beaten on sea, the Dutch will seize his ports or the Spaniards will invade him by land."

"Although the Spaniards be neutral?" queried Aramis.

"Neutral so long as the King is the stronger," retorted D'Artagnan.

Colbert admired a sagacity that never touched a question without illuminating it.

Aramis smiled. He knew only too well that as a diplomatist he had always met his master in D'Artagnan.

Colbert who, like all proud men, was certain of carrying out successfully any project to which he was partial, resumed:

"Who told you, M. d'Artagnan, that the King had no navy?"

"Oh, I have not examined into details," answered the musketeer. "I am but a poor sailor. Like all nervous people, I hate the sea. However, I think that with our vessels—France being a maritime nation of some two hundred ports,—we should have sailors."

Colbert drew from his pocket an oblong notebook divided into two columns. On the first was a list of ships; on the second figures recapitulating the number of cannon and men with which these vessels were equipped.

"I have had the same idea," said he to D'Artagnan, "and I have had an account drawn up of the vessels we have added to the navy. There are thirty-five of them."

"Thirty-five! Impossible!" cried D'Artagnan.

"And about two thousand pieces of cannon," continued Colbert. "That is all the King possesses at present. Out of thirty-five ships you can form three squadrons, but I want five."

"Five!" exclaimed Aramis.

"They will be afloat before the end of the year, gentlemen. The King will have fifty ships of the line. We can do something with them, can we not?"

"To build vessels may be difficult, but is not impossible," observed D'Artagnan. "But to arm them — that is another story. In France we have neither foundries nor military workshops."

"Bah!" cried Colbert, his face lighting up, "why, I have been busy constructing them for the last year and a half, and you did not know it? Are you acquainted with M. d'Infreville?"

"D'Infreville?" repeated D'Artagnan. "No."

"He's a man I have discovered. He has his specialty. He knows how to set men to work. He has been casting cannon at Toulon and cutting timber in the Burgundy woods. And then, you may not believe what I am going to tell you, M. l'Ambassadeur, but I had another idea.

"Oh! monsieur," courteously answered the ambassador, "I can easily believe anything you say."

"Well, having a pretty good idea of the character of our Dutch allies, I said to myself: They are tradesmen, they are the King's allies, they will be delighted to sell him their manufactures. Therefore, the more we buy of them — ah! I was forgetting Forant — are you acquainted with Forant, D'Artagnan?"

Colbert had forgotten himself. He had addressed the captain quite simply as D'Artagnan, like the King. But the captain only smiled.

"No," said he, "I don't know him."

"Another one of my discoveries. His specialty is as a buyer. This Forant has purchased for me 350,000 pounds of iron in balls, 200,000 pounds of gunpowder, twelve cargoes of northern timber, matches, grenades, pitch, tar, — more things than I can describe to you, — and has saved us seven per cent. on what these things would cost if manufactured in France."

"That, certainly, is an idea," replied D'Artagnan, "getting the Dutch to cast balls for you, which you intend afterward to cast back at them."

"And cast as damaged articles, eh?"

Colbert laughed aloud, with his rather dry, coarse laugh. He was delighted with his joke.

"Moreover, these same Dutchmen are building for the King, at the present moment, six vessels, designed after the best models of their own navy. Destouches — ah! perhaps you don't know Destouches?"

"No, monsieur," replied D'Artagnan.

"He is a man with a singularly sure eye for the good and bad qualities of a ship that has just been launched. A valuable talent, that! Nature is really very whimsical. Well, I thought Destouches just the right sort of a man to have in a port, and he is watching the construction of the six vessels the United Provinces are building for his Majesty. They will have each seventy-eight guns. You must see from all this, my dear M. d'Artagnan, that if the King wanted to quarrel with the United Provinces, he would have a pretty fair sort of a fleet. Now, you know yourself better than any one the splendid condition of our land forces."

D'Artagnan and Aramis stared at each other in surprise and admiration at the mysterious changes accomplished by this man in a few years.

Colbert understood them. This unintentional flattery moved him more than anything else could have done.

"If we in France knew nothing of all this, outside France they must know still less," said D'Artagnan.

"Just what I have been remarking to M. l'Ambassadeur," returned Colbert; "so that if Spain is neutral and England aids us —"

"If England aids you," interrupted Aramis, "I can promise you the neutrality of Spain."

"Your hand on that," exclaimed Colbert, with his blunt joviality. "And, by the way, speaking of Spain, you have not the Golden Fleece, M. d'Alaméda? I heard the King say the other day he should prefer seeing you wear the ribbon of St. Michael."

Aramis bowed.

"Alas!" thought D'Artagnan, "and Porthos is not here! When all these largesses are going about, there would have been a few ells of ribbon for him, surely! honest Porthos!"

"M. d'Artagnan," resumed Colbert, "I fancy, between ourselves, you would have no objection to leading your musketeers into Holland. Do you know how to swim?"

And he burst out laughing, like a man who is in a very gay humor indeed.

"Like a fish," answered D'Artagnan.

"Ah! but there are some ugly spots to be crossed in the canals and marshes over there, M. d'Artagnan, and the best swimmers get drowned."

"It's my trade to die for his Majesty," replied the musketeer. "But since you rarely meet much water during a campaign without meeting a little fire also, I may as well tell you beforehand that I'll do all I can to select fire in such an eventuality. I am getting old, and water chills me. Fire always warms, M. Colbert."

D'Artagnan, with his youthful vigor and pride, looked so distinguished when uttering these words that Colbert could not help admiring him.

D'Artagnan saw the effect he had produced. He remembered that the most successful tradesman is the one who sets a high price on his goods when they are really valuable. He prepared, then, to state his price in advance.

"So," said Colbert, "we're going to Holland, then?"

"Yes," replied D'Artagnan; "but —"

"But?" repeated Colbert.

"But interest and self-love have a little to do with everything. The salary and honors attached to the position of captain of the musketeers are no doubt very fine; but you see we have now the King's guards and the military household of the King. A captain of musketeers ought to command all these bodies, and, in that case, he would need a hundred thousand livres a year for his table and in order to make an appearance befitting his rank —"

"Do you really suppose the King is going to haggle with you?" said Colbert.

"Oh, monsieur, you have misunderstood me," exclaimed D'Artagnan, now sure that the question of interest was settled in his favor. "What I wanted to say is: Suppose that I, an old captain, once chief of the King's guards and having precedence of the marshals of France, should happen to find myself some day or other in the trenches with the captain of the guards and the colonel of the Swiss, and all three of us on a footing of equality — now, I could not endure such a thing at any price. I have old habits, and I intend to keep to them."

Colbert felt the blow. He had been prepared for it, however.

"I have been thinking of what you were saying to me a moment ago," he answered.

"What was it, monsieur?"

"We were talking of those canals and marshes in which a person might be drowned."

"Well?"

"Well, no one can be drowned, if he have a boat, a plank, or even a stick."

"Even though the stick be as short as a baton?" said D'Artagnan.

"Precisely," returned Colbert. "I never yet heard of a French marshal who was drowned."

D'Artagnan turned pale with joy, and replied in a voice that faltered:

"They would be very proud of me at home in my native place if they heard I was a marshal of France. But it is necessary to be the commander-in-chief of an expedition in order to obtain the baton."

"Monsieur," said Colbert, "there is in this notebook, which you will please study, a plan of campaign to be followed by the different corps that the King will place under your orders next spring."

D'Artagnan took the book with a trembling hand, which the minister grasped loyally.

"Monsieur," said Colbert, "we have both a revenge to exact from each other. I have had mine; it is now for you to have yours."

"I shall make you a full return, monsieur," replied D'Artagnan; "and be good enough to tell the King that, upon the first occasion that may be offered, he will hear of a victory or hear of my death."

"Then I will have the golden fleur-de-lis affixed to your marshal's baton immediately," said Colbert.

The next morning Aramis, who was about to start for Madrid to negotiate the treaty of neutrality with Spain, came to D'Artagnan's hôtel to bid him adieu.

"We must love each other enough for four," said D'Artagnan, "now that we are only two."

"And you may never see me again, my dear D'Artagnan," answered Aramis. "Ah! you will never know how much I loved you! And I am now old, dying, almost dead!"

"My dear friend," said D'Artagnan, "you will live longer than I shall. Diplomacy orders you to live, while honor condemns me to die."

"Bah!" exclaimed Aramis, "men like us, M. le Maréchal, die only when they are satiated with pleasure and glory."

"Ah!" replied D'Artagnan, with a melancholy smile, "I have lost my appetite for both, M. le Duc."

They embraced once more, and two hours afterwards they were separated.

THE DEATH OF D'ARTAGNAN.

CONTRARY to what is always happening, both in politics and in morals, every one kept his promises and did honor to his engagements.

The King recalled M. de Guiche and banished the Chevalier de Lorraine; so that Monsieur took to his bed in consequence.

Madame started for London, and was so successful in opening her brother's eyes to the political wisdom of Mademoiselle de Kéroualle's counsels, that the alliance between France and England was signed, and English vessels, ballasted by a few millions of French gold, made terrible havoc among the fleets of the United Provinces.

Charles II. promised Mademoiselle de Kéroualle that he would not prove ungrateful for her good advice; he made her Duchess of Portsmouth.

Colbert had promised the King ships, munitions, and victories. He kept his word, as we know.

Finally Aramis, whose promises were the least of all to be relied on, wrote the following letter to Colbert, on the subject of the negotiations at Madrid:

"M. COLBERT:

"I have the honor to send you the R. P. d'Oliva, General ad interim of the Society of Jesus, my provisional successor.

"The reverend father will explain to you, M. Colbert, that I retain the direction of all the affairs that concern France and Spain, but that I do not wish to keep the title of general, since my doing so would throw too much light on the progress of the negotiations with which his Catholic Majesty has deigned to charge me. I shall resume this title, by his Majesty's order, when the negotiations I have entered into, in concert with you, are terminated, in a manner conducive to the greater glory of God and of his Church.

"The R. P. d'Oliva will also inform you, monsieur, of his Catholic Majesty's consent to the signature of a treaty which insures the neutrality of Spain in case of war between France and the United Provinces.

"This consent would remain good, even if England, instead of taking an active part in hostilities, should be neutral.

"As to Portugal, of which country you and I have spoken, I have to assure you, monsieur, that it will aid his most Christian Majesty in this war with all its resources.

"I pray you, M. Colbert, to be pleased to continue to me your friendship, as well as to believe in my profound attachment, and to lay my respects at the feet of his most Christian Majesty.

"Signed: LE DUC D'ALAMEDA."

Aramis had done more, then, than keep his promise; it remained only to discover whether the King, Colbert, and D'Artagnan would be faithful to one another.

As Colbert had predicted, the army entered on its campaign in spring. It preceded, in magnificent order, the court of Louis XIV., who rode at the head of the flower of his kingdom to this bloody festival, surrounded by carriages full of ladies and courtiers.

The officers of the army had, it is true, no music except the booming of the artillery from the Dutch forts. But it contented a very large number, who found in this war honors, advancement, fortune, or death.

D'Artagnan commanded a body of twelve thousand men, cavalry and infantry, with which he was ordered to take the different strong places which form the knots of that strategic network called Friesland. Never had an army been conducted more gallantly on an expedition. The officers knew that their leader, as prudent and astute as he was brave, would not sacrifice a man or an inch of ground without necessity. He followed the old customs of war, namely, living on the country, keeping the soldiers singing and the enemy weeping. The captain of the King's musketeers displayed a certain coquetry in showing that he knew his trade. Never were opportunities better chosen, surprises better seconded, faults of the beleaguered turned to better account. D'Artagnan's army took twelve small fortresses in a month.

He was now before the thirteenth, which had been holding

out for five days. D'Artagnan had the trenches opened. Even his pioneers and laborers were full of emulation, ideas, and zeal, because he treated them like soldiers, knew how to make their task seem glorious to them, and never let them be killed except when he could not help it. So it was worth while seeing the fury with which they turned up the marshy soil of Holland. These mud-banks and heavy clays melted, as the soldiers used to say, like the butter in the vast frying-pans of the Friesland housewives.

D'Artagnan sent a courier to the King with despatches relating his last successes; this increased his Majesty's good humor and his inclination to amuse the ladies. These victories gave such majesty to the prince that Madame de Montespan never addressed him now but as Louis the Invincible. Consequently Mademoiselle de la Vallière, who called him only Louis the Victorious, lost much of his Majesty's favor. Besides, her eyes were often red, and nothing disgusts an Invincible so much as a weeping mistress, especially when all around the Invincible are smiling. The star of Mademoiselle de la Vallière was sinking below the horizon in clouds and tears. But the gayety of Madame de Montespan grew brighter with every fresh success, and consoled the monarch for every other unpleasantness, and all this was due to D'Artagnan.

His Majesty wished to recognize such services. He wrote to M. Colbert :

"M. COLBERT: We have a promise to keep with M. d'Artagnan, who is keeping his. I wish to inform you that the hour has come to fulfil it. You shall be furnished with all due provisions for the purpose at the proper time.

"LOUIS."

Colbert, then, who had D'Artagnan's messenger with him, handed this officer a letter and a little ebony box inlaid with gold, not very heavy in appearance, but doubtless very heavy in reality, since the messenger was given a guard of five men to enable him to carry it. These guards arrived in front of the fortress D'Artagnan was besieging, about daybreak, and made their appearance at the general's quarters. They were told that M. d'Artagnan, somewhat put out by the conduct of the governor, a sly rascal, who had made a sortie the night before, destroyed his works, killed seventy-seven of his men,

and begun to repair the breach made by his army, had just gone out with ten companies of grenadiers to reconstruct the works.

M. Colbert's messenger had orders to seek M. d'Artagnan wherever he might be, and at whatever hour of the day or night. He made his way, then, to the trenches, followed by his escort, all on horseback.

It was easy to distinguish D'Artagnan in the open plain, with his gold-laced hat and his long cane. He was biting his white mustache and brushing off from his tunic, with his left hand, the dust thrown up by the balls that ploughed the soil around him.

They also witnessed, in the midst of the terrible fire, which filled the air with its whizzing and hissing, the officers handling the shovels, the soldiers rolling the wheelbarrows, and the vast piles of fascines, carried thither and heaped up by a score or half a score of men, which covered the front of the trench reopened to the centre by this extraordinary effort of the general to inspire his soldiers.

Within three hours everything was repaired, and D'Artagnan began to speak more gently. He was quite calm when the captain of the pioneers came, hat in hand, to inform him that the trench afforded cover. This man had scarcely finished speaking, when a ball cut off one of his legs and he fell into D'Artagnan's arms. The latter encouraged the soldier, took him up in his arms, and carried him into the trench, amid the enthusiastic cheers of the regiments.

From now on it was not ardor that seized the soldiers, it was delirium. Two companies stole away and rushed upon the outposts, which they destroyed in a few seconds.

When their comrades, who could hardly be held in by D'Artagnan, saw them lodged on the bastions, they sprang after them, and there was soon a furious struggle at the counter-scarp, on which the fate of the place depended.

D'Artagnan saw that there was only one way left him to stop his army, and that was to hurl it on the fortress. He directed all his forces on the two breaches which the enemy were repairing. The shock was terrible. Eighteen companies took part in it, and D'Artagnan advanced with the remainder to within half cannon-shot of the place, to support the assault by echelons.

The cries of the Dutch, who were being poniarded by his grenadiers, could be heard distinctly. The struggle grew more

savage with the despair of the governor, who was disputing every inch of ground.

D'Artagnan, to bring the affair to an end, and silence the fire, which never stopped, sent a fresh column, which penetrated like a wimble through the posts that were yet solid, and the terrified besieged could soon be seen, in the midst of the fire, on the ramparts, pursued by the besiegers.

Just at the moment when the triumphant general was having time to breathe, he heard a voice at his side, which said :

“On, the part of M. Colbert, if you please, monsieur.”

He broke the seal of a letter containing these words :

“ M. D'ARTAGNAN: The King charges me to inform you that he has named you Marshal of France, in reward of the good service and the honor you have done his arms.”

“ The King is delighted, monsieur, with the captures you have made already ; he commands you especially to finish the siege you have begun, with good fortune for yourself and success for him.”

D'Artagnan was standing, his face heated, his eyes sparkling. He looked up to see the progress made by his troops on the walls, which were still enveloped in volumes of red and black smoke.

“ It is nearly all over,” said he to the messenger. “ The town will surrender in a quarter of an hour.”

He continued his reading :

“ The casket, M. d'Artagnan, is my own gift. You will not be sorry to observe that, while your warriors draw their swords to defend the King, I am giving life to those peaceful arts that are destined to adorn the rewards worthy of you.”

“ I recommend myself to your friendship, M. le Maréchal, and beg you to believe in mine.”

“ COLBERT.”

Intoxicated with joy, D'Artagnan beckoned to the messenger, who approached with the casket in his hands. But at the very moment the marshal was about to examine it, a powerful explosion resounded on the ramparts and drew his attention to the quarter in which it occurred.

“ It is strange,” he said, “ that I do not see the royal flag

on the walls or hear the drums beating the summons to parley."

He launched three hundred fresh men under one of his most dashing officers, and ordered another breach to be effected. Then, feeling somewhat more at his ease, he turned his attention to the casket which Colbert's messenger was holding out to him. It was his property; he had won it.

D'Artagnan reached out his hand for this casket, when a ball from the ramparts shattered it to pieces in the officer's arms, struck D'Artagnan full in the chest, and knocked him down upon a sloping heap of earth, while the fleur-de-lisèd baton escaped from the broken sides of the box and rolled down under the nerveless hand of the marshal.

D'Artagnan tried to rise. It was believed he had been thrown down, but not wounded. Then a terrible cry rose from the dismayed officers near him: the marshal was covered with blood, and the pallor of death was slowly mounting to his noble visage.

Supported by the arms that were extended on all sides to receive him, he was able once more to turn his eyes towards the fortress, and to descry the white flag on the crest of the principal bastion. His ears, already dulled to the sounds of life, caught feebly the roll of the drums which proclaimed the victory.

Then, clutching the baton with its golden fleur-de-lis convulsively in his nerveless hand, he cast upon it the eyes that had no longer the power to look up to heaven, and fell back, murmuring those strange words, which amazed the soldiers as much as if they had been cabalistic incantations, — words which had once been significant of so many things on earth, and which now none but the dying man could any longer comprehend:

"Athos, Porthos, we meet again! — Aramis, adieu forever!"

Of the four valiant men whose history we have related, there remained but one. God had taken back to himself the souls of the three others.

